

**CITY  
OF  
SILK**





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*For Izzie – my Persephone.  
With love from your Demeter.*



*Report on an applicant for a  
place at the orphanage of Santa  
Maria del Baraccano, Bologna,  
in the year of our Lord, 1566*

We are satisfied that the girl is a true orphan, lacking both father and mother, and is from a respectable artisan family. In the absence of any other living kinsman, she has been recommended by one of her father's journeymen. Her baptismal certificate has been examined and gives her age as ten years. Father and mother were citizens and she was born within the city walls. She has been neither begging nor working as a domestic servant nor tending animals in the fields since her parents passed from this life. This testifies to righteous conduct, but without the protection of the orphanage her honour could be in peril before much time has passed.

She has no deformities or disease – is neither blind, deaf, mute, hunchbacked, nor lame. Her eyesight is sharp. Though she speaks little, she is obedient and not considered lazy or a gossip. She has been verified as a virgin by a respected gentlewoman and shows no signs of an evil disposition. Though

she is not especially fair, there is no impediment to her being placed in employment and married in due course, so long as she contracts no disfiguring ailment whilst under the care of the mistresses. In sum, there is nothing to indicate that she would weigh down the orphanage.

There is one further attribute to note. The girl has, it would appear, some knowledge of sewing which will be of benefit both to the orphanage and to herself.







# Chapter One

Bologna, 1575

**I**n those days, before we all took our revenge, a man in Signora Ruffo's workroom was as noteworthy as marten fur lining in a velvet cape – and a good deal less welcome.

The Signora had been widowed long before (her husband one of those tailors whose workshops stud the Via Drapperie) and her clients knew well that menfolk were not gladly received at their fittings. Fathers and husbands likely paid for the gowns and capes, the undershirts and overdresses, but neither their attendance nor their approval was required. The fittings took place in the afternoons and each working day was separated into two distinct parts. In the mornings there were but three of us in the workroom. The Signora and I spent our time cutting and sewing, and the loudest sound was that of shears sliding through silk or the soft thud when Sofia moved a bolt of fabric. The afternoons were a swirl of female chatter and gossip as each client swept in, accompanied by at least one sister or friend to

give advice, together with a lady's maid to be loaded up with discarded clothing. Signora Ruffo had set up a corner of the workroom as a fitting area. There were tapestry chairs softened with cushions, a painted screen – its design of mulberry trees a constant reminder of the source of the city's wealth – and two small tables on which wine was served once the damasks and brocades had been safely put aside. As a rule, the two of us moved from one customer to the next, pinning and tweaking, reassuring and encouraging, until the last had flurried down the stairs.

That afternoon I was on my knees adjusting the hem of a blue silk gown (its owner far too short to do it justice, in my opinion) when a male voice, announcing its owner as Signor Martelli, rumbled under the usual chirruping and caused us all to look towards the door. I had expected the Signora to hustle the man away, but he wore the air of an expected visitor and she invited him to sit at her embroidery table, where they remained in conference for two strikes of the hour from the clock on the Accursio Tower. Signor Martelli was hard to place – his clothes were not those of a nobleman but they were well cut and the fabric of good quality. And he was neither old nor especially ugly. If I had thought a little harder, I would have tumbled to it, but I was too busy grappling with the swathes of silk.

I had spent all morning working on the gown, its colour mirrored in the early spring sky beyond the open windows. Only on the coldest days, when fingers became too stiff for sewing and chilblains threatened, would Signora Ruffo allow the shutters to be closed. She always said that working in the gloom is a certain road to crooked seams and clumsy pleating. Every so often, I had to stop and rub my hands together for

warmth before picking up my needle again to continue the row of small and perfectly even stitches, but I did not mind. A room full of light, however cold, does not make me shiver – unlike shadows and flickering candles. The Signora’s palazzo is tall and elegant, much like the mistress herself, and situated at the end of a block where the last buildings in the street surrender to smallholdings. From the top-floor workroom the view stretches as far as the solid walls which encircle the city and, in the other direction, to the jumble of buildings and towers which make up the church of San Francesco. He had been my favourite saint in my mother’s bedtime stories, and I sent up a quick prayer for my next piece of work to consist of something other than sky-blue ruffles and flounces. A mourning dress in a sombre *monachino* would be perfect: collar standing sentinel around the neck, tightly fitted bodice and the only decoration a few tassels.

After making a neat finish to the final seam, I had gathered up the silk gown in my arms. The Signora was seated at her table embroidering a stomacher with gold thread which glittered in the sunlight, but she put it aside to scrutinise every finger’s length of my work. Finally, she looked up and smiled.

‘Excellent work, Elena. I could have made you the best seamstress in Bologna – given more time.’

I twisted my thimble ring round and round.

‘Signora, is there any likelihood that this afternoon there may be a lady who requires a more . . . fitted gown?’

‘There speaks a tailor’s daughter! Always looking at shape rather than embellishment. Your mother should have birthed a boy.’

There was the rub. My skills may have rivalled those of any

pustule-faced apprentice, but my sex decreed that the door of every tailor's workshop in the city was closed to me. A gown may be as elaborate and well fashioned as any doublet and breeches but its making is women's work. There is no honour in it – or money either. Time and again, I had bludgeoned the mistress about my ambition but her response never wavered: that the closest a woman may get to being a tailor is to marry one. Her dismissal served to avoid further argument.

‘Now, hurry along and help Sofia prepare for the clients.’

I bobbed a grudging curtsey before scooping up the completed gown and draping it over the hanging beam.

It was not the Signora who taught me to sew; I learnt those skills in my father's workshop, sitting on his knee. And later, inside the Baraccano, my talents were put to such good use that, on leaving, I was placed as a seamstress rather than some rich woman's drudge. But it was Signora Ruffo who taught me to measure and fit, to make adjustments which enhance a long neck or disguise a thickening waist. Most seamstresses do not venture beyond undershifts of fine white linen, while for outer garments there is Drapperie where many of the tailors are content to clothe women as well as gentlemen. But some ladies of good taste do not want to be measured and prodded by a man – and an artisan at that. Signora Ruffo made it her business to provide everything such clients may require, from a hooded cape to an undershift edged with decorative stitching. Not that I was required to make undershifts any longer.

The previous October, around the feast of San Petronio, Signora Ruffo had decided that there was too much work for just herself and me. Sofia sews a good, straight seam and can do so in haste when a customer decides for some reason that she

has desperate need of new undergarments before the end of the week. It is also Sofia's job to keep the workroom tidy, which she does with great attentiveness; there is never a dropped needle or a speck of lint to be found on the floor. Sofia is not her real name, but no one is able to pronounce that, and I can no longer even recall it. When she arrived, her language was like an uneven seam, all stops and starts, with an accent even stranger than that of the Sicilians who haggle over the price of cocoons in the Pavaglione. In the afternoons she was kept busy at a distance from the clients. They were, for the most part, the wives and daughters of rich silk merchants, or aristocrats who had somehow clung on to the Holy Father's goodwill. If Sofia came too close, those ladies would affect a shudder. One even told the Signora that her new assistant needed to be scrubbed clean to get that horrible colour from her skin. But Sofia continued to sway a path around the edges of the room, her expression always serene.

Sofia and I each had a narrow bedroom, high up under the beams of the palazzo. One night I had been lying awake, fearing dreams of the Baraccano, when I heard sounds through the thin wall which divided the two rooms. Sofia was speaking aloud, but I could not work out what she was saying – even less who she could be talking to. I got up and pressed my ear to the wall: Sofia was repeating phrases she heard used in the workroom.

‘Bring the crimson damask over here, please.’

‘Feel the quality of this silk velvet, Signora.’

‘Has anyone seen my needle?’

Sofia was trying to improve her Bolognese! From time to time, she would pause on a word and say it over and over again, struggling for the correct pronunciation.

The following evening, as soon as the murmuring began, I tapped on her door. For a few moments there was silence, then Sofia opened it a crack, her head lowered in apology.

‘Sorry, Elena, sorry. I have disturbed.’

‘I heard you practising. May I help?’

‘No. Thank you. You sleep. I be quiet.’

It took me the length of a Mass to persuade her, but from that time onwards we spent every evening together. We began by chanting the names of fabrics and equipment, but Sofia was a quick learner and soon she was making up her own sentences. Gradually, the lessons turned into conversation and we would gossip about the clients. I even taught her some of the things I would like to say to them – on strict instructions that they must never be repeated:

‘I am sorry, Signora, but you are far too old to be wearing that.’

‘If you are rude to me again, I will stick pins in you.’

At first Sofia would trap a giggle behind her hand but soon we were both laughing out loud, glad that the mistress slept two floors below. We talked of clothes and handsome young men we had caught sight of in the street, but neither of us spoke of life before joining Signora Ruffo. For me, it would be like scratching an open wound, and I imagined that the same was true for Sofia. Even at that time, I thought it unlikely that she had arrived in Bologna of her own will. Though our talk in the workroom was of practical matters, sometimes we would catch each other’s eye and have to turn away to hide our smiles.





It was about a week later that Signor Martelli stood on the threshold again, but this time there trailed behind him another, whose black robes and hat marked him out as a notary. Some of them, I knew, were learned men of means while others could scarcely afford their own quills; the depth of dye in this one's garments suggested that he fell somewhere between the two. He pulled from his bag a sheaf of papers as thick as half a Bible before joining Signor Martelli at the Signora's embroidery table. I tried to hear what was being said, but their discourse was held in an undertone and my customer would keep prating on about the exact fit of her bodice. Sofia was closer to the Signora's table and I hoped that she had been able to unravel some words.

After less than an hour of the clock the notary left, his robes flapping like the wings of a crow, while Signor Martelli remained seated, legs outstretched, and gazed around as though he owned us all. Each time his eyes lit on me, I repaid him with a scowl. Only when fitting had ended for the day did the Signora escort him downstairs along with the remaining customers. I immediately sidled over to Sofia.

'Did you manage to catch anything, Sof? Is Signora Ruffo making a will? Please tell me that man is not buying her business.'

Sofia continued stabbing pins into a pin pillow and would not meet my eye.

'It is about marriage, I think. They say "betrothal". That is marriage, yes?'

Though I felt as though a stone had settled inside me, I attempted a laugh.

'The mistress marry? She would never do that. She has

nothing to gain and would lose all her freedom. You must have misheard.'

'Not the mistress. They put names on papers. His name.' She looked up with a weak smile. 'And yours.'

I turned away, in need of re-winding a roll of damask. At that moment the Signora came back into the workroom and I strode across to her.

'Is it true?'

'Remember your manners please, miss.'

Sofia edged to the side of the room and looked like she wished to fade into a fabric bolt. I sketched an unwilling curtsey.

'I beg pardon, Signora. Is it true that I am to be married to Signor Martelli?'

Signora Ruffo gestured towards her table.

'Come and sit down with me.'

'No – I thank you. Please answer me, Signora.'

'I intended to tell you this evening, my dear, but I see that you have worked matters out for yourself. He is a good man, recently widowed, with no children. His wife died soon after their marriage.'

'I do not care about his wife! Nor do I wish to be his new one.' My voice was rising and I could feel the heat in my face. 'If I am not allowed to be a tailor, why may I not remain here? You are pleased with my work, are you not?'

'You know that I am, Elena, but you cannot pretend surprise.' Her voice was scratched with irritation. 'Three years of work and then a marriage – they are the Baraccano rules. I have done my best for you.'

All at once the cut of Signor Martelli's clothes made sense. I sighed.

‘So he is a master tailor – but I surmise that he will not allow me to work.’

Signora Ruffo lowered her head and smoothed the gap between her brows.

‘Some tidying of his workshop, perhaps, but that is all. I tried, Elena, but he was obdurate.’

She probably took my silence as submission, but I had already made my resolve: I was not going to marry Signor Martelli.