

THE SAFFRON CROCUS

Alison McMahan

## CHAPTER 1

### Isabella

*Venice, 1643:*

Signora Margherita patted Isabella's shoulder. "It's time to warm up."

Isabella reached for her glass of sweet wine. She breathed in the honey-like aroma. She was too nervous to take a sip, overcome by the same fear that always assailed her right before a performance. Through the bedroom window she could hear the cries of the gondoliers as guests pulled up to Margherita's dock.

Isabella's stomach seemed to drop to the floor. "Margherita, are you sure I can do this?"

Margherita pushed up Isabella's bodice to emphasize her cleavage. "God gave you everything you need to become a great singer."

Isabella pushed down her bodice and adjusted her neckline to flatten her cleavage. "Yes, and then He made me a girl, so I can never sing in Signor Monteverdi's choir."

"Lean forward."

Isabella bent her head obediently. Signora Margherita tested the band of pearls holding Isabella's hair in place. "You have a wonderful ear. You are a quick study and very spirited. There are other places where you can sing."

"In your salon, you mean."

"Or in your own."

Only courtesans or very wealthy married women had their own salons. Isabella didn't want to consider either possibility. Since she had turned fifteen, everyone talked about when she would get betrothed. But Isabella didn't feel ready for marriage. Not yet.

She changed the subject. "You did invite Signor Monteverdi, didn't you?"

Margherita studied the accessories she'd laid out on the bedroom table. She picked up a necklace, then put it down, and picked up a feathered fan instead. Her dark, heavily made-up eyes peered at Isabella from over the edge of the fan. "Of course I did. I'm sure he will come if he can. The most important people of Venice will be here tonight. Including some very eligible young men. I've seen to that." She winked at Isabella coquettishly.

Isabella was too anxious to play along. "And do you think Signor Monteverdi will be swayed—"

Margherita came over and kissed her forehead. Her perfume smelled like juniper berries on a cold morning. "You are my favorite pupil." Her voice was full of affection. "But you still have much to learn. Now, let's warm up."

They sang "Nana Bobò." When Margherita had first taught her the song Isabella could hardly bear to sing it. It reminded her of everything she'd lost. Now she found it comforting.

*"Nana bobò, nana bobò,  
tutti i bambini dorme ne Guido no."*

Her voice rose and spread around the bedroom, then circled slowly and languidly down to meet Margherita's harmony, their voices smooth and powerful as they sang the chorus for a sleepless baby.

There was a knock at the door. Margherita stopped singing and rushed to pull it open.

A gorgeous young man, hatless, in a simple but elegant black jacket, a plain white collar, with a sword at his hip stood in the hallway. He looked to be seventeen or eighteen. His soft brown hair hung in uneven waves around his face.

Margherita threw her arms around him and kissed his cheeks.

The young man looked over Margherita's shoulder at Isabella. He pulled out of Margherita's hug and held up a package.

"Oh, yes, thank you for bringing it." Margherita turned to Isabella.

"This is my son, Rafaele." She mussed his hair. "He's returned from a journey to Rhodes for me."

Isabella's mouth fell open. "That's your son?"

Margherita patted her son's cheek. "Now tell me, don't you find him handsome?"

Isabella studied Rafaele's face, glad for a reason to satisfy her curiosity. His cheeks and the tip of his nose were a little sunburnt. He had a wide, crooked grin, which almost looked like a smirk. His eyes were a dark brown, almost black.

He was the most beautiful young man she'd ever seen.

"Signorina Isabella." Rafaele came into the room and bowed. "I've heard so much about you." He held out the package. "This is for you."

Isabella was confused. "You're bringing me a gift?"

"It's from me," Margherita said. "Rafaele just picked it up and is delivering it for me."

Isabella unwrapped the package and gasped. It was a brooch, a lovely flower made of some purple stone, resting on leaves made of enamel and decorated with tiny diamonds. "It's lovely."

Rafaele stared at the jewels in her hand. The laughter had gone out of his eyes and his crooked lips had straightened into a thin line. Isabella wondered why. Didn't he know what was in the package that he himself delivered to her?

Margherita seemed not to notice her son's reaction. She took the brooch from Isabella and opened the clasp. She slid the point of the pin through the thick cloth of Isabella's dress then tried to push it in farther. "Ouch!"

The brooch clattered to the floor. There was a long scratch on Margherita's hand that formed a little puddle of blood. "I cut myself."

"Don't bleed on your dress." Isabella led her teacher to the washbowl and poured clean water from the silver pitcher over the wound. The wound continued to bleed. "We will have to wrap it," she said.

"It's going to leave a scar," Margherita mourned.

Isabella found a binding cloth, tore a strip from it, and wrapped Margherita's palm. "Don't worry about that now." She pulled at her mentor's wide sleeves to conceal the impromptu wrapping. "Sit down, let me fix your hair."

Margherita's hair had gotten mussed when she embraced her son. Isabella smoothed the older woman's thick curly hair with an ivory comb. Margherita's hair was a vivid red, but when Isabella pulled the strands of hair apart she noticed the roots were gray. Her mentor dyed her hair. Embarrassed, Isabella quickly combed the errant curl back into place and secured the jeweled headband again.

Margherita looked up. "Rafaele, could you attach the brooch for her? I am injured."

Rafaele didn't move. "You aren't giving it to her, are you?"

“You have this bad habit of putting your hand on your chest when you sing,” Margherita said to Isabella, as if Rafaele hadn’t spoken. “Wear this to remind you not to put your hand there. Please, Rafaele, pin it on her.”

“But—it’s the saffron crocus.”

“I’m training Isabella. She’s going to follow in my footsteps. Aren’t you, Isabella?”

“Training her for what, Mother? What?”

Isabella jumped. Rafaele’s voice was loud. Outraged.

Margherita put her hand on his arm. “As a singer, my son. As a singer.”

Isabella flushed a deep red. She felt bad she had caused the fight, even though she didn’t know exactly what they were fighting about. Margherita motioned at her son again. His mouth was still pressed into a thin line, but he took the brooch.

“I have to—” he mumbled.

Isabella wanted to put the brooch on herself, but Rafaele slid two fingers between her bodice and her *camicia* and carefully guided the pin until the brooch was securely attached. His long, silky hair brushed her cheek when he leaned down. She breathed in his scent, a combination of rosewater and the air of the lagoons.

For some reason, she felt a little dizzy.

“There.” He straightened up.

“Thank you.”

But Rafaele walked out of the room without saying another word. When he slammed the door the candlelight wavered and the room dimmed.

“It’s time.” Margherita opened the door Rafaele had slammed and out to the hall, looking back once to make sure Isabella followed.

As they went down the hall Isabella admired Margherita's self-assured walk. Her mentor moved smoothly, elegantly, almost a glide. Instead of going down after Margherita, she leaned over the balcony and peered at the crowd. The sounds of the salon wafted up the stairs. Domenico, who had played music with her since she had first started to perform, tuned his lute. She recognized a couple of girls she went to school with.

Well, they were still in school. She could no longer afford to go.

At least she still had her singing lessons.

The murmured conversation of the people waiting to hear her sing ebbed and flowed, like the lapping waters of the Grand Canal.

She saw Rafaele cut his way through the crowd, not greeting anyone. How rude he was.

“Isabella.” Margherita had come back up the steps to fetch her.

“I don’t see Signor Monteverdi.”

“There’s still plenty of other people eager to hear you.” Margherita took her arm and led her down the steps. “I hope Rafaele didn’t leave.”

Isabella felt that all the energy had drained out of her. It seemed almost pointless to sing if Signor Monteverdi would not be there. “He’s in the back. I wished you had warned me he was coming to see you.”

“Do I need to warn you whenever there is a young man around?” Margherita’s eyes still searched the audience. She squeezed Isabella’s arm.

Now her disappointment over Signor Monteverdi seemed petty. She threw her arms around her mentor. “Thank you, for everything.” She said, hugged Margherita tight.

“Now, now. Don’t mess up your hair. Or mine, for that matter.” Margherita took Isabella’s hand and led her down.

Isabella hoped Rafaele was still there, that he wouldn't disappoint his mother. He had been so rude to her.

In the salon her Aunt Cecilia greeted her with a proud smile and glistening eyes. "If only my sister could see you now."

Isabella kissed her.

Margherita hugged her friend. "This young lady is about to make you very proud."

Aunt Cecilia was about the same age as Margherita and just as beautiful, with large gray eyes and a tall, elegant carriage. But she was ill and frail. Her black hair was now white. Her drawn face made her look almost like an angel in a painting. Isabella often worried about her aunt's health, but today Cecilia seemed well and happy.

Rafaele leaned against the wall at the back of the room, still glowering. Why was he so angry? What had happened between him and his mother?

Isabella tapped Margherita's shoulder. "There's your son."

"He's sulking again." Margherita motioned at Rafaele to join them, but Rafaele did not move.

Cecilia patted Margherita's shoulder. "At least he's here."

Margherita smiled at her gratefully, then moved away to greet her guests.

"Why didn't *you* tell me I'd be meeting Margherita's son today?" Isabella whispered to her aunt.

"Margherita tells you things when she's ready," Cecilia whispered back.

Isabella's friends Lucia and Paolina came up to hug and kiss her.

"It's so wonderful to see you!" gushed Lucia.



“We never see you anymore!” complained Paolina. She saw Isabella’s brooch and gasped, reaching out to touch the delicate flower petals. “Are you betrothed?”

“Oh no.” Isabella blushed even at the suggestion. “My singing teacher gave it to me.”

“Your singing teacher?” Lucia looked over at Margherita. “Perhaps I should take lessons with her, too.”

Isabella was sure they knew she and her aunt were having money problems, as she had had to withdraw from school. The same problem prevented her from inviting people to her aunt’s house, as they could not afford to entertain in the proper style. But she was grateful they cared enough to come and hear her sing. “Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoy it.”

She turned to find her spot and nearly collided with Domenico. Domenico worked in his father’s shipping business. He spent his days on the docks, inspecting the wares on the ships when they came in, arguing with customs officials and foreign ship captains. It was rough and often dirty work, and yet by nightfall he was always clean, perfumed, and dressed in the latest fashion. Tonight a red velvet hat set off the tousled curls that framed his high forehead. His jacket had slashed, puffed sleeves in dark and light shades of blue, and the collar of his fine linen shirt gave a glimpse of his strong chest. He was just shy of twenty, but he carried himself confidently and easily, even when dealing with merchants twice his age.

As always when they were to perform together, he had chosen his clothes to match her gown. She knew, even without a mirror, that they would look splendid next to each other on the stage. She smiled warmly at him.

“You look...” Words seem to fail him. He looked her over, taking in the pearls in her hair, her dress, her cleavage.

“Could I hear the note?” Isabella said.

It took a moment for Domenico to collect himself, and then he plucked the right note on his lute. Isabella hummed it.

Domenico sat down on the stool and positioned his lute on his knee. Margherita and Isabella stood on either side of him. Everyone in the room quieted, except for the rustles of anticipation. Their audience included about twenty-five of Venice's nobility and wealthiest merchants.

But not Signore Monteverdi.