

CHAPTER 1

BEATRICE

Bergamo valleys, December 1604

Maria Locatelli was a simple woman. Having been denied the chance to explore the world beyond the small mountain village where she had been born and raised and have a taste of the endless possibilities it offered, she had soon learned to be content with what the good Lord had seen fit to grant her in life.

She had found in Pietro Locatelli a decent, honest, and hardworking husband; most of the inhabitants of the little mountain hamlet where they lived had nothing to their name, but the Locatelli were fortunate enough to own a farm which, although modest, provided them with a roof over their head and enough food to quench the hunger in their bellies.

Within ten months of their union the couple had been blessed with the arrival of their first child, Antonio, followed by the twins, Luca and Alessio, and finally their youngest, Fabrizio. Maria's heart burst with pride every time she glanced upon her four healthy sons.

It was a cold December night, and, despite the late hour, Maria lay awake in bed. It wasn't her husband's loud irregular snores, the scratching of mice trapped within the walls, or the creaking noises of the house, rattled by a strong wintery wind, that prevented her from succumbing to the restful blissfulness of sleep, but the thoughts that had imperceptibly crept into her mind the moment she had discovered she was once again with child and that, in the past nine months, had slowly developed into unshakable worries. She placed a hand on her swollen belly, and, as she distractedly massaged the outstretched skin, the baby kicked, eager to remind her of its presence. Maria exhaled and sat up, resting her head against the hard stone wall.

Childbirth itself did not frighten her. Having brought four healthy children into the world, she was fully aware of what to expect and of the pain she must endure. No, indeed, it was not the thought of childbirth that kept her awake through the long and dark night, but the concerns for what came after. She did not doubt that, despite the ear-piercing shrieks and the wailing that would accompany its arrival, her heart would immediately overflow with joy and love at the sight of her baby. But then... then... Life was hard and farming was such an unpredictable profession. Too much rain and the crops would fail; too much sun and the crops would fail. Some days they already struggled to put enough food on the table, and four growing boys were like a pack of famished wolves, often polishing their dinner in seconds and pleadingly staring at the pot, hoping for more. How could they possibly expect to manage with another mouth to feed?

Refusing to dwell any longer on unanswerable questions, Maria pulled the blankets off her weary legs and got up. As her bare feet touched the cold floor a chill immediately ran through her body and she shivered, like a leaf in the wind. Tentatively sliding her hands across the straw mattress, she found her woollen shawl, crumpled in a ball at the feet of the small bed she shared with her husband. She donned it around her shoulders and tiptoed outside the room, leaving the door ajar. She peered into her sons' bedroom and listened to the cacophony of breathing and light snoring, a reassuring sign that all children were deeply asleep.

The living space was faintly illuminated by the copper light of the dying embers, lining the bottom of the hearth, and by the silvery glow of the moon shining through the window. Her eyes gradually adjusting to the semi-darkness, Maria found a jug of water. She poured the crystal-clear liquid into a small wooden tankard, brought it to her lips, and slowly sipped it. The nagging pain in her lower back, that had troubled her for hours, seemed to momentarily ease. She opened the wooden shutter, enjoying the freezing night air on her face, and her lips curled into a smile at the sight of the beauty that lay before her eyes. She had seen it before, hundreds of times, but it never ceased to make her gasp in awe. A white blanket of snow covered the mountains, the fields, the barns, the village; kissed by the light of the full moon, the world around her shimmered in a diamond-like glow.

‘Everything will be all right,’ she whispered, closing the shutter. ‘Somehow, we have always managed.’

A sudden sharp pain, as if someone had thrust a dagger into her lower back and had begun to cruelly twist it deeper and deeper into her flesh, left her gasping for air. She inhaled, concentrating on the cold air filling her lungs, and then slowly exhaled, waiting for the pain to vanish. It did not; it simply subsided only to return, a few seconds later, with renewed intensity.

A warm, sticky liquid trickled down her legs and collected in a puddle on the floor.

‘Pietro! Pietro!’ she screamed, one hand clenching her stomach and the other touching the wall for balance.

As another painful spasm shook her body, she heard footsteps and noises coming from the bedroom, and, moments later, her husband appeared - dishevelled, his breeches unfastened, his shirt unlaced, and a candle in his hand. The baffled expression on his sleepy face was comical, and Maria would have surely laughed had she not been in excruciating pain.

‘Maria? What is the matter?’ he croaked.

He outstretched his arm and shone the light of the candle towards his wife.

She let out an exasperated sigh.

‘It is time... The baby is coming,’ she hissed through gritted teeth.

Plunged into reality by his wife’s words, Pietro began nervously pacing around the room, unprepared, panicked, and clearly unable to discern how to best proceed.

‘The midwife!’ Maria screamed. ‘Send for the midwife!’

Pietro swivelled around and noticed his four children standing a short distance away, rubbing their sleepy eyes with their small bony hands, their mouths opening in silent yawns.

‘Antonio!’

‘Yes, father,’ the older boy said, snapping to attention.

‘Your mother needs help, boy. Run as fast as you can and fetch Gianna!’

Antonio rushed inside the bedroom and emerged moments later, a worn brown cloak over his night garments. Without wasting precious time fastening it, he opened the door and disappeared into the dark, wintery night.

Gianna sat, fully clothed, on the armchair strategically placed by the hearth, enthralled by the sinuous dance of the flames. The older she got, the more she found herself inclined to spend most of the long nights reminiscing about the past and pondering over the future, rather than sleeping and granting her aching bones the rest they clearly deserved.

The villagers often referred to her as the “wise lady”, most women admiring her knowledge and most men fearing it. On her part, she knew that if she possessed a wisdom, it was not due to her being

blessed with any particular intellectual abilities but to the fortune of having been alive for almost fifty years, relentlessly fighting through the many tribulations that life had periodically thrown in her path.

She tightened the rough woollen blanket around her body, the coarse fabric of her dress itching the sensitive skin of her arms as it rubbed against it, leaned back into the chair, closed her eyes, and thanked God for the mercy He had shown her and the long life and good health He had granted her.

A loud knock startled her. She slowly heaved herself off the chair, exclaiming 'Just a moment!' as the banging became more insistent.

She unbolted the door and opened it. A wintery blast invaded the house, immediately followed by the scrawny figure of a child.

'Antonio?!' she exclaimed in surprise, recognising the eldest of the Locatelli's boys.

He walked to the centre of the poorly furnished cottage, and, with frantic movements of his small hands, he rubbed the snow from his worn cloak and garments.

'Why are you out so late, boy? You should be in your warm bed, not battling the elements in this cold, blustery night.'

'Father sent me,' Antonio explained, still panting from the run. 'He said we need your help. Mother...'

'Your mother is in labour!' she interrupted him, suddenly remembering that Maria was nearing the end of her pregnancy. 'She is slightly earlier than I predicted. I was not expecting her to give birth for at least another week. Never mind,' she added, noticing the look of fear and worry in the young child's eyes. 'Let us not waste any more time. I shall come with you at once!'

She wrapped her cloak around her shoulders, stooped slightly with age, fetched her box of remedies, placed it safely under her arm, and followed the boy outside the house.

When they reached the Locatelli farm, even the loud howling of the wind failed to drown Maria's wails. Antonio opened the door and led Gianna inside the house. The midwife quickly scanned the candlelit room, overlooking the children silently watching from a distance, their faces a ghostly shade of white and their little bodies trembling in fear, and Pietro nervously pacing back and forth, and rested her kind green eyes on Maria. The expectant mother was bent forward, one hand gripping the edge of the long wooden table, the other massaging her lower back, a guttural animalistic groan seeping through her sealed lips.

'Gianna,' she whispered, her hazel eyes filling with relief as she spotted the midwife.

The older woman offered her a reassuring smile, then turned to Pietro and matter-of-factly instructed him, 'We must move her into the bedroom. I will also need clean towels and some boiling water.'

He nodded and immediately headed towards his wife.

'Antonio!' Gianna called, beckoning the young boy to approach her.

He rushed to her side.

'You have done an amazing job, and we are all very proud of you. I need you to be even braver now. Take your brothers, bring them into your room, and keep them occupied. Can you do that for me?'

'Yes, Gianna,' he responded, delighted that, at the mere age of eight, he should be entrusted with yet another important task.

Pietro, a muscly arm wrapped around her, slowly led Maria into the bedroom. Once inside, he accompanied her to the bed and helped her lying on it. His hands, strong and callous from years of hard work, handled his wife as if she was a precious relic. Gianna entered the small chamber carrying a wooden basin filled to the brim with water, steam wafting from it.

'I can handle it from here, Pietro,' she said, placing the large bowl on the bedside table. A few drops of water spilled on the wooden surface; she swiftly wiped them with a cloth. 'You should go to your sons. They are frightened and...'

A howl escaped Maria's lips and brusquely interrupted Gianna, who immediately grabbed her patient's hand.

'Go, Pietro. The boys need you,' Maria prompted him, before squeezing her eyes shut and biting down on her lower lip as another spasm shook her body. A metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

Pietro tenderly caressed his wife's flushed cheeks, moved the damp locks away from her face, and softly kissed her brow, whispering, 'I love you.' Then, his eyes never leaving Maria, he slowly backed out of the room.

As the door slammed shut, Gianna began to examine the patient. Her long bony fingers expertly stroked Maria's bulging belly, trying to determine the position of the foetus.

'I cannot lie to you, my dear. It will not be an easy birth. It appears to be a strong-willed baby, reluctant to leave the safety of its mother's womb. Just follow my instructions, and, I promise, everything will be fine. Do you trust me?'

Maria volunteered a barely perceivable nod. Then, her face twisting in a grimace, she let out another scream. Trying to offer some respite from the excruciating pain, her mind plunged her into a state of semi-unconsciousness, in which blissful visions and comforting hallucinations mingled with the crudity of childbirth. Wallowing in this new world, seemingly deprived of most senses, Maria lost track of time. Uncertain if mere minutes or hours had passed, she heard Gianna's voice piercing through the haziness and reluctantly let it drag her back to reality.

'Push, Maria. I need you to push!'

As if spellbound, her body responded.

'Well done! It is almost over,' Gianna comforted her. 'Now, I want you to take a deep breath and to push one last time.'

'I cannot, I cannot,' Maria protested, rivulets of sweat dribbling down her face, neck, and chest.

'Yes, my dear, you can. You must! Push, Maria, push!'

Despite the rational voices in her head suggesting that she was too frail to obey the command, she soon discovered that the call of nature is too strong to be ignored or denied. She took a deep breath, trying to summon the last strands of energy left in her exhausted body. Then, her fingers twisting the sheets upon which she lay, Maria heaved herself from the mattress and gave a final push, sighing as the life inside her finally left her womb.

Exhausted, she fell back onto the bed. A high-pitched shriek pierced her ears, echoed through the night, and ruptured the peaceful silence.

'It's a girl, Maria. A strong and healthy girl!' Gianna exclaimed as she delicately wiped the new-born, wrapped her in a clean towel, and gently placed her in her mother's outstretched arms.

Maria silently stared at her newborn daughter, her hazel eyes sliding from her wrinkled face, to her little pursed mouth, to her tiny hands and feet. She nervously counted her fingers and toes, checking that everything was just as it should be.

'She is perfect. She is just perfect,' she whispered, placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head and inhaling the already familiar scent of her skin. 'My sweet girl. My sweet Beatrice.'

Gianna sat by Maria's side, a rewarding feeling of accomplishment warming her heart. As her long fingers caressed the infant's face, she bestowed her blessing upon the new arrival, 'May your life be lengthy and joyful. May you find love and happiness. And may God spare you from hardship and tribulations. Welcome to the world, Beatrice Locatelli!'

Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter, buy the book to continue reading.

[CLICK HERE TO BUY THE BOOK](#)