

COLOR SONG

by Victoria Strauss

CHAPTER 2

A SECRET REVEALED

Convent of Santa Marta, Padua, Italy

September, Anno Domini 1488

Ten months later

Giulia paused before Humilità's door, preparing herself. Each time she visited, she found it harder to bear the changes in her teacher, harder to pretend she was not desperately afraid.

She knocked and stepped inside, breathing the chamber's familiar odor—medicine and sickness—imperfectly masked by the herbal infusion simmering on a brazier, a scent she had learned to loathe. As usual, the windows were shuttered and the room was drowned in shadow. The only illumination came from a pair of candles burning on a table by the bed.

Humilità lay propped on pillows, her wasted body hidden under heavy quilts.

“How are you, Maestra?” Giulia knelt by the bed and took the hand Humilità held out to her. The workshop mistress's fingers, once so strong and capable, felt like a collection of twigs.

“Less than I was yesterday.” Humilità smiled with a ghost of her old sardonic edge. “More than I will be tomorrow.”

She had admitted to her illness in the spring, when she could no longer hide the wasting that was stealing her strength and melting her flesh away like candle wax. There was nothing the infirmarians could do. Through the summer she'd kept working, but toward the end of August she had taken to her bed. She had not left it since.

“Please don't speak like that, Maestra.”

“Ah, Giulia. Should I lie to you when you ask me such a question?”

Giulia looked away from the knowledge in her teacher's face. “I've brought my

Annunciation to show you.”

“In a moment. I have something for you. There’s a paper under my pillow. Reach it out for me.”

Giulia laid her painting on the floor and obeyed. The workshop mistress unfolded the paper and smoothed it flat. She gazed at it a moment, then offered it back to Giulia.

“This is yours now.”

Giulia held the paper near the flickering candles so she could see. It was a paint recipe, written out in Humilità’s familiar script. A recipe Giulia had never seen before.

Or . . . wait. . . .

She gasped. “Maestra—this is— Is this . . . ?”

“Yes. It is Passion blue.”

Giulia felt something terrifying expand inside her chest. “No.” She tried to thrust the paper back into Humilità’s hands. “I don’t want it.”

“It’s time, Giulia.”

“Not yet! It’s not time yet!”

“Don’t be foolish.” Humilità’s tone was sharp. “You are stronger than this.”

Giulia had never felt less strong. She dropped the paper on the bed and hid her face in her hands, knowing as she did how selfish it was to trouble her teacher with her grief. But the paper and the recipe it held—a secret Humilità had never shared with anyone else, ever—were too much of a shock. Normally she could hold her thoughts away from the inevitability of Humilità’s death; but now, all at once, it was a black pit right at her feet.

After a moment she felt Humilità’s hand on her head. “Hush,” the workshop mistress said. “Calm yourself. I have more to say.”

With enormous effort Giulia raised her head, using her sleeves to dry her cheeks.

“This was not an easy decision, Giulia. For more than twenty years I have kept the secret

of Passion blue. It has brought me fame, but it has also brought me grief.”

Giulia nodded. She knew the grief Humilità meant: her betrayal by her father, Matteo Moretti, also a painter of fame, who had schemed to steal Passion blue for himself.

“I thought perhaps I would let the formula perish with me. But it is beautiful, this thing I created, and beauty should not be allowed to die. So I’ve chosen to let it live on, with you—with you and you only, Giulia, for you are the most gifted pupil I have ever had, and I know that you will use it well. I cannot make you Maestra after me, as I’d hoped. I cannot give you the workshop. But I can give you Passion blue.”

“You honor me, Maestra.”

“Be truthful. Don’t tell me you did not hope for this.”

“Someday,” Giulia admitted. “When I became a master painter. Not now. Not like this.”

“Now or later, it is God’s will.”

God’s will is cruel. Giulia looked down at the recipe where it lay on the shadowed covers of Humilità’s bed—written not in cipher, as she had often seen it in Humilità’s leather-bound book of paint formulas, but in words she could read. There was not a painter in Padua who did not covet this formula, even those who would never admit that a woman was capable of painting as magnificently as a man. *How many would give gold to see what I am seeing now?*

“Does Domenica know?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“She’s not . . . angry?”

“It is not her place to be angry. It is my recipe, and my decision, and she well knows it. But she has accepted with good grace.”

I’m not so sure of that. Inwardly, Giulia sighed.

“There is something else, Giulia. I must ask something of you.”

“Anything, Maestra.”

“It has been more than a year since I’ve communicated with my father, but I doubt his greed has lessened. He will certainly suspect that I have given you Passion blue, and he may come to you to find out. If he does”—Humilità shifted, turning so she could look into Giulia’s eyes—“you must not give it to him.”

A chill rolled up Giulia’s back. “I never would, Maestra.”

“Swear to me.” In the past weeks Humilità’s gaze had become distant, as if part of her were already gone. But now she was fully present, her dark eyes blazing with all their former force. “Swear on your mother’s soul that you will never give him Passion blue.”

“I swear it. On my mother’s soul, I swear. Maestra . . . do you really think he’ll come?”

“He is not one to forget, or to relent.” Humilità settled back against her pillows. “Remember, Giulia, he is only a man. He cannot touch you inside these walls. Santa Marta will keep you safe.”

Memories unfurled inside Giulia’s mind: a dark night, a locked attic, Matteo Moretti’s face looming over her like a thundercloud. She bent her head and took up the paper, folding it again into quarters and stowing it in her sleeve.

“Do you ever think of that boy?” Humilità’s eyes were closed. “The thief, the one my father hired to steal Passion blue. Ormanno Trovatelli.”

For a moment Giulia was too surprised to answer. This was their secret, known only to the two of them, and they never spoke of it. Ormanno’s face appeared inside her mind, handsome and sly—a memory that carried a scalding rush of shame, though it had been more than a year since he had beguiled her by pretending that he loved her, then tricked her into telling him the workshop’s secrets.

“I try not to, Maestra,” she said. “I was such a fool, not to see that all he wanted was to get his hands on Passion blue.”

“Don’t put him out of your mind completely. Our mistakes shape us. We forget them at our peril.” Humilità opened her eyes again. “Show me your Annunciation now.”

Giulia bent to undo the canvas that wrapped her painting. Some of the paints were still sticky; faintly, she could hear them singing, dwindling toward silence as they dried. *My own secret*, she thought, wishing with sudden intensity that she could share it with Humilità, as Humilità had just shared Passion blue with her. But who would believe that the paints she made

and used sang to her, each with its own voice? Humilità might think her mad, or cursed. She'd never been quite brave enough to speak.

She placed the painting in Humilità's hands and pushed one of the candles closer so Humilità could see. The painting was small, an ashwood panel only two hand spans wide, but even so, Giulia could tell that it was hard for her teacher to hold it.

"I know it needs improvement," she said when Humilità did not speak at once.

"Not so very much," Humilità said. "The folds of the angel's garments hang a little stiffly, do you see? And you've not got the light on the Madonna's face quite right—if your sunlight comes through the window at this angle, your shadows should slant more to the left." She skimmed her finger above the painting's surface, illustrating what she meant. "But overall it is a fine effort. Very fine indeed."

"I'll work on correcting it, Maestra."

"Ah, Giulia." Humilità let the painting fall and reached out both her hands. "How I wish God had allowed me to live long enough to see what you'll become."

Her eyes glittered in the candlelight, and Giulia realized with a shock that they were filled with tears. She had never seen her teacher weep, just as she had never heard her complain about or question or grieve her fate. She took Humilità's hands in her own, resting her forehead on their joined fingers. Her entire body ached with the effort not to cry.

After a moment Humilità pulled gently away.

"I'll rest now. Perhaps you could stop at the infirmary and ask Sapiencia to bring me another dose of poppy."

Giulia nodded, for she did not trust herself to speak. She wrapped her painting again, then rose and stood looking down at her teacher. Humilità's hands were folded on her breast, and her eyes were closed. In the shifting candlelight, her face looked like a skull.

A year and a half. Only a year and a half since I came to Santa Marta and she took me as her apprentice. Yet I feel as if I've loved her always.

What will I do when she's gone?

The candle flames fluttered, their light too weak to reach the edges of the room. Giulia

felt the loss that crouched in the shadows, an emptiness waiting to devour her.

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Giulia stopped at the infirmary to relay Humilità's request for poppy. Then, instead of returning to the workshop as she was supposed to, she headed for the little nun's cell where she lived alone, hurrying along as if she were on an important errand and hoping none of the sisters she passed would challenge her. She closed her door and sat on her bed, and carefully pulled the recipe out of her sleeve.

Passion blue. The color that had made Humilità famous, named for the painting of Christ's Passion in which she had first used it. How many times had Giulia seen this formula in Humilità's book of paint recipes—her book of secrets—written out in the incomprehensible cipher Humilità used for the most precious of her colors? How many times had she tried to imagine what special ingredient, what exotic technique, made Passion blue so luminous and alive? And here was the answer. A list of materials—some expected, some surprising—and a detailed, exacting preparation procedure.

Giulia had not understood, when Humilità had first taken her into the workshop, why a paint recipe should be so valuable. Paint was paint, was it not? Surely it was only a matter of mixing and combining, like making bread or simmering soup. But as Humilità initiated her into the secrets of paint making, Giulia began to realize how difficult it was to create colors that kept their brilliance as they dried, that did not alter or darken under layers of lacquer, that resisted the ravages of cold and heat and damp and time. A single ingredient, a fraction of a measure, was all the difference between a pure color and a corrupted one, a color that endured and one that faded. Color was the painter's language, and Passion blue was a new word in that language, a word of matchless beauty that had not existed before Humilità invented it. A word only Humilità had been able to speak—until now.

It was almost disappointing to see it written out this way, its mysterious essence reduced to black marks on a white page. Yet thrilling too: Humilità's crowning achievement, coveted by so many, and now Giulia's, Giulia's alone. Giulia felt her fingers burning as they did when some face, some scene, some trick of light demanded that she draw or paint it. She imagined following the instructions on this paper, step by careful step. She imagined the paintings on which she'd lavish Passion blue, glowing like stained glass—dozens of paintings. Scores of them. As many as she could make in the lifetime that lay ahead of her.

And I'll hear it singing. I will hear its voice, the first color song I ever heard and the most beautiful, sounding just for me.

For an instant a new world seemed to open at her feet, dazzling. But then she thought of

Humilità, skull-like against her pillows, and felt a rush of guilt. How could she take pleasure in the secret when it was hers only because Humilità lay dying? She had the burden of keeping and defending it now too, which Humilità had also passed to her. She thought of Matteo Moretti and shuddered. *Perhaps he's forgotten me. Perhaps she's wrong, and he will not come.*

Oh, how I wish everything could be as it was!

Her throat was full of tears again. She dropped the paper and bowed her face into her hands. At her side, barely audible, the drying paints of her Annunciation sang whisper-harmonies.

At last she straightened. She retrieved the paper and tore away its margins to make it as small as possible, then folded it into a tiny square and stowed it inside the waxed canvas pouch she wore at her neck, concealed beneath her shapeless novice gown. The pouch also held a fragment of her natal horoscope, which she'd carried with her since she was seven years old.

Two secrets, safe against her skin.

She left her cell. In the main hallway she paused, overwhelmed by the desire to return to Humilità, to sit by her in the dimness and hold her hand. Perhaps she'd be sleeping now, with her poppy dose. But perhaps she'd be awake, and Giulia could whisper in her teacher's ear, at last, her own secret of the color song.

Only knowing that Domenica might punish her by forbidding her to visit Humilità at all made it possible to resist. Reluctantly Giulia turned toward the workshop, and the many tasks that waited for her there.

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Humilità never woke from the poppy she took that afternoon. She lingered for another day and part of another night. Sometime in the dark hours, in the depths of the Great Silence, she died.

And all at once the world was empty, and Giulia was empty too. *I should have gone back*, she thought, curled up on her bed with the covers drawn over her head. *I should have gone back*. In the rawness of her grief, it seemed the worst mistake she had ever made.

CHAPTER 3

THE SIN OF PRIDE

Giulia had never wanted to be a nun.

That decision had been made for her when she was seventeen, after her father had died and she became an orphan. Desperate to escape her unchosen fate, she'd paid an astrologer-sorcerer to seal a celestial spirit inside a talisman, bound to her heart's desire: true love, as she believed then, a man to save her from the convent. The spirit's name was Anasurymboriel, and though the sorcerer swore he'd summoned it from the realms of angels, Giulia knew such magic was a sin. Faced with a barren lifetime as a nun, she hadn't cared.

But magic did not announce itself, or come neatly labeled. She'd mistaken fair-haired, charming Ormanno Trovatelli for Anasurymboriel's gift. By the time she realized her mistake, he had gotten what he really wanted: Humilità's book of secrets, and with it, the formula for Passion blue.

Giulia had taken back the book. She'd returned it to Humilità and confessed everything. She was punished for her transgressions: burdened with penances, condemned to live apart from the other novices so she would not infect them with her dishonesty. But for the sake of her talent, she was allowed to remain in the workshop—and by then she had wanted to stay. For she understood at last that painting was her true heart's desire. She'd chosen to embrace it, even though it meant she must become a nun.

She had destroyed the talisman, releasing Anasurymboriel back to the heavens from which the little spirit had briefly been drawn down. She'd been glad to see it go. *No more magic*, she promised herself. She was finished with such remedies, with their tricks and their traps and

their risk to her immortal soul.

But magic was not finished with her. When Anasurymboriel departed, it left her changed. At least she thought it must have—for how else could she explain why she'd suddenly become able to hear the colors singing?

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The workshop reopened the day after Humilità's funeral.

Arriving, Giulia paused before the open doors. The whole world had changed—how could it be that the great chamber looked the same as always, with its vaulted ceiling and red-tiled floor and orderly work areas, and smelled the same as always too, of oil and charcoal smoke and chalk dust and exotic materials? For the first time since she had become Humilità's apprentice, Giulia wanted to turn away, to flee from this place that would never again be filled with Humilità's voice and her genius and the force of her brilliant, restless personality. It took all the will she had to cross the threshold.

Domenica had come in first, as always. She had already tied back the curtains that were drawn at night across the workshop's open north side and brought her easel over to the light. Now she was laying out her palette and brushes with her usual tight efficiency.

“Good morning, Maestra,” Giulia said.

Domenica raised her head and fixed Giulia with a raking stare, then returned to her work without replying.

Sighing, Giulia went to tie on her apron. Unlike the other painters, Domenica had never forgiven her for her part in the theft of Passion blue. Domenica had kept her animosity more or less in check while Humilità was well, but once Humilità had left the workshop and Domenica became Maestra in all but name, she'd ceased troubling to hide it. Giulia had never told Humilità about the sharp criticism, the undeserved reprimands, the efforts to deny her any personal drawing or painting time. She wished now that she had not been so reticent.

This is how it's going to be from now on. A grinding depression filled her. Or perhaps it will get worse.

She fetched charcoal and lit the braziers as the other painters arrived: kind Perpetua, whom Humilità had promoted from journeyman to master just before she became ill; pretty Angela, formerly an apprentice and now a journeyman, who'd become Giulia's fast friend; lovely, flighty Lucida, one of the wealthiest nuns at Santa Marta and a talented miniaturist.

Elderly Benedicta, the workshop's third master painter, was absent. She'd become frail over the past months and often was unable to work.

When they were all gathered, Domenica gave a speech, acknowledging her now-permanent position as the workshop's leader and praising Humilità. She stood stiffly at the center of the room, her hands hidden in her sleeves, her face showing no expression. She might have been speaking about a stranger.

It was a long, grim day. Humilità's absence haunted the workshop like an echo. The painters worked in silence—Perpetua at the drafting table; Angela at her easel; even Lucida, who normally delighted in defying Domenica's prohibition of unnecessary conversation—one of the many new rules Domenica had imposed since she took over the running of the workshop. Giulia prepared paints, welcoming their familiar songs, which distracted her at least a little from her sadness.

She'd learned a great deal since that blustery November morning when Passion blue first sang to her. Raw materials had no voice; it was only in the final stages of the preparation process—after she'd soaked or boiled or crushed them, after she'd strained them and dried them and ground them to fine powder on a marble slab—that their songs began to swell, rising as she added water and oil and other substances to bind them into paint.

There was not a color now that she could not hear. Black, compounded from charred animal bones, thrummed like a drum. Vermilion, derived from the mineral cinnabar, sizzled. Crimson lake, extracted from red-dyed silk, warbled like a flute. The various ochres rasped and hummed, as arid as the earth they were dug from. She could judge the quality of the paints she made by ear now, even better than she could by eye. She'd begun to experiment with pigment combinations and paint layering in her practice paintings, creating harmonies and counterpoints, achieving color effects that impressed even Benedicta, the workshop's acknowledged master of color lore.

The songs' peak was brief. Almost as soon as the paints were mixed, their voices began to dwindle, sinking toward silence as they dried. Giulia knew of only one color that retained a ghost of its former music: Passion blue, whose icy chime breathed almost imperceptibly from paintings years or decades old, as faint as a forgotten dream.

It was a long time since she had feared the voices of the colors. A long time since she had prayed each night to God to take the songs away. For they were beautiful, and their beauty called irresistibly to her artist's soul. Even when she'd been most afraid she had felt that seductive pull.

There were days when she wondered whether she was sinning by surrendering to the

songs, by embracing them in her art—whether the singing of the paints was the stain that magic had imprinted on her soul, ground into her substance like the charcoal dust that blackened her fingers. But there were other days when the songs pierced her to the heart, and her whole being soared with the wonder of perceiving this hidden truth about the world. On those days the color song felt like a gift. On those days she could not believe that something so beautiful could come from any hand but that of God.

What had changed her so? Anasurymboriel. She could think of no other explanation. The spirit must have left something inside her when she set it free, altered her in some inexplicable way. Or perhaps it had taken something with it, removed some barrier or inhibition to expose what had been there all along.

She could not guess whether the change was permanent, or whether it would someday vanish as suddenly as it had arrived. But the color songs were part of her now, wound as deep into the substance of her being as the roots of the cypresses in the soil of Santa Marta's gardens. Sin or not, she knew that if they left her, she would bitterly mourn their passing.

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Vespers arrived at last, and with it the end of work. The nuns departed, leaving Giulia to clear up.

She was the workshop's only apprentice now. Humilità had promoted Angela from apprentice to journeyman a year ago, but she had not been able to find a replacement to suit her; and to spare Giulia, she had given all the painters a share of apprentice tasks: the preparation of paints and other materials, the constant cleaning. Once Humilità became ill, Domenica gave those responsibilities back to Giulia. Angela still helped where she could, but Giulia often had to labor far into the evening to get everything done, sometimes leaving tasks uncompleted so she could return to her cell before Compline, when Suor Margarita, the novice mistress, came to lock her in.

This night she finished early. She was blowing out the candles when she heard footsteps. She turned, expecting Angela—but it was Domenica.

"I am glad you are still here," Domenica said, in a tone that suggested the opposite. "I wish to speak with you. Come to my office, and bring a candle."

Giulia obeyed. She felt dread, but no surprise. She'd known this confrontation was coming.

Three days ago, Humilità's possessions had crowded the office: books, painting tools, the chunks of quartz and amethyst she'd used as paperweights, sketches nailed to the walls. Now Giulia saw that they had all been removed. The chests that contained the workshop's papers and accounting ledgers had been rearranged. Only the locked cabinet that held Humilità's book of secrets remained in its old place.

Giulia set down the candle on the newly bare surface of Humilità's desk, waiting as Domenica seated herself in Humilità's chair and folded her hands before her. Domenica's face, gaunt with constant fasting, was as pale as paper within the severe frame of her wimple and veil. The air in the little room was perceptibly chillier than in the workshop, for there was no brazier. Domenica, who strove never to take pleasure in the comforts of the body, preferred to endure the cold.

"Before she died," Domenica said, "Humilità informed me that she intended to give you Passion blue."

"Yes, Maestra."

"You have the recipe, then?"

"I do, Maestra."

The corners of Domenica's mouth turned down. "You should know that I consider her actions highly inappropriate. Her mind was unclear, especially at the end. I believe her judgment was impaired."

"I saw her the day before she died." Giulia had to struggle to keep her tone respectful. "She was as much herself as ever."

"Of course you would say so. Especially if it was your idea."

"*My* idea?"

"You may have fooled Humilità and the others, Giulia Borromeo, but you have never fooled me." Domenica fixed Giulia with a flat, unblinking stare. "I know what you are capable of. You showed your true face last year when you whored yourself to that thief, Ormanno Trovatelli, and helped him steal our precious book of formulas. I think you saw your chance to steal from us a second time by whispering lies into the ears of a dying woman."

Giulia was too stunned to speak. She knew very well that Domenica detested her. She'd

been certain Domenica must be angry at Humilità's decision to bequeath her Passion blue, no matter what Humilità believed. But she'd never imagined anything like this.

"So," Domenica said. "You don't deny it."

"I do deny it." Giulia's tongue felt stiff. "She gave it to me of her own free will. I didn't ask for it. I didn't even want it."

"Then you should have no trouble surrendering it."

"Surrendering it?"

"To me and to the workshop, where it should have gone to start with. A workshop is not simply a collection of individual painters. It is a body, with all its limbs connected, no part of it divided from or superior to another. Humilità did not understand that. She separated herself from the rest of us. She raised herself above us, not least by keeping secret what should have been shared with us all."

"But she *did* share with us all! Passion blue is part of all our paintings!"

"That was not *sharing*. That was *husbanding*. Only she could read the cipher, only she could mix the paint or use it. She made sure that it was *she* who became famous, *she* who was acclaimed. She forgot that it is not our own names we glorify by the work we do, but *God's* name. Even in her illness she would not renounce her pride—do you know she tore the recipe out of the book and took it with her to her sickbed, so the secret would not pass out of her hands? And then, knowing herself to be dying, did she bequeath this precious thing to the workshop, whose reputation it sustains? No. She bestowed it upon *you*, her protégé, her pet. A mere apprentice. A girl of proven cunning and dishonesty."

There was a moment of echoing silence. Slowly Domenica relaxed her hands, which had tightened into fists.

"It is in you too," she said quietly. "The sin of pride. It is no wonder Humilità took you for her own, for you are like her. But you must humble yourself or there is no place for you here."

The chilly office suddenly seemed to have acquired a deeper cold. "What are you saying?"

"Give the recipe for Passion blue to me. And since I have no doubt you have already

memorized it, you are henceforth forbidden from mixing it or using it, except at my express instruction.”

“But—the Maestra wanted me to have it! It was her wish!”

“I am your maestro now. I have given you a command. If you do not heed it, I shall have no choice but to dismiss you from your apprenticeship.”

All the air seemed to have left the room. “But you can’t do that,” Giulia said faintly.

Rage flared behind Domenica’s rigid face. “*What* did you just say to me?”

“Maestra—I’m sorry—but you know—you know what Maestra Humilità wished for me—for my training and my future—”

Domenica brought both her open palms down hard on the surface of the desk. “*Humilità is no longer here!*”

It shocked them both to stillness for a moment. Then, deliberately, Domenica sat back, clasping her hands before her once again.

“I have made myself clear. You take your final vows in a little less than three weeks. You have until then to follow my command. That is all. You may go.”

Numb, on legs that did not feel like her own, Giulia turned to obey. Nearly to the door, Domenica’s harsh voice reached after her.

“She believed your gift was God given. But I know that gifts can come from other sources, and that some have no purpose but to corrupt and to deceive. She should never have let you back into the workshop.”

Deep emotion heaved beneath the words, like a fire raging under a stone. Giulia did not pause. But even after she was safe inside her cell, she could feel the heat of Domenica’s hatred, and hear the poison of her condemnation.