

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

*The  
Midwife  
of Venice*

ROBERTA RICH

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## About the Book

*'At midnight, the dogs, cats, and rats rule Venice. The Ponte di Ghetto Nuovo, the bridge that leads to the ghetto, trembles under the weight of sacks of rotting vegetables, rancid fat, and vermin. It was on such a night that the men came for Hannah.'*

Hannah Levi is famed throughout Venice for her skills as a midwife but, as a Jew, the law forbids her from attending a Christian woman.

However, when the Conte di Padovani appears at her door in the dead of night to demand her services, Hannah's compassion is sorely tested. And with the handsome reward he is offering, she could ransom back her imprisoned husband.

But if she fails in her endeavours to save mother and child, will she be able to save herself, let alone her husband?

## About the Author

ROBERTA RICH divides her time between Vancouver and Colima, Mexico. She is a former family law lawyer. *The Midwife of Venice* is her debut novel. Visit Roberta at [robertarich.ca](http://robertarich.ca)

Praise for *The Midwife of Venice*:

‘A lively tale involving love, blackmail, family, murder, plague, intercultural compassion, dramatic last-minute rescues and some very creative disguises.... Rich capably depicts the strength of women and the precariousness of their lives, regardless of status or religion’ *The Globe and Mail*

‘A compelling and engaging novel, a well-researched high-stakes drama written with elegance and compassion: fascinating!’  
*Sandra Gulland*

‘A meticulously researched page-turner that evokes renaissance Venice with remarkable clarity, radiance, and vigour’  
*William Deverell*

‘Not only did Roberta Rich transport me to sixteenth-century Venice, with its seductive tapestry of smells, sights, textures and beliefs, she involved me in a poignant story of seasoned love.

I don’t know which I admired more — the wonderfully realized setting or the suspenseful story of Hannah and Isaac’

*Katherine Ashenburg*

‘A suspenseful tale.... The book is obviously well researched, and its descriptions of Venice and Malta are both fascinating and realistic’ *Vancouver Sun*

*The  
Midwife  
of Venice*

ROBERTA RICH



EBURY  
PRESS

*To Mimi Meehan  
1920-2007*





## AUTHOR'S NOTE



I first came upon the idea of writing about Hannah as I was wandering through Venice. I ended my walk having a *correcto* and *hamantashen* cookies in the Jewish Ghetto Nuovo in Cannaregio. I was struck by how closely this small island resembled a movie set, with its open square, only a wellhead to break the expanse, and narrow, knife-sharp buildings enclosing the *campo* on three sides.

In the 1500s, as more and more Jews arrived from northern Europe, Spain, and Portugal, the tiny apartments shrank even more as they were partitioned into cramped living quarters, rather like a cake sliced into small and smaller pieces as unexpected guests arrive. Floors were added, and eventually the city government permitted the Jews to expand to two additional islands, Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Novissimo.

In trying to imagine what day-to-day life must have been like, I thought of women raising large families in overcrowded conditions. This led to thoughts of midwifery and, from there, to the notion of birthing spoons. I then had to imagine how these birthing spoons would be used and who would be wielding them. And so the idea of *The Midwife of Venice* was born.

Did such a midwife exist? I like to think so, although in my research I never came across a reference to such a woman. This is no doubt because the history of women, their fortitude and accomplishments, is written in water.

If you are interested in further exploring this fascinating era of history, I include a list of readable and interesting books from my research.

## CHAPTER 1



# *Ghetto Nuovo, Venice* 1575

AT MIDNIGHT, THE dogs, cats, and rats rule Venice. The Ponte di Ghetto Nuovo, the bridge that leads to the ghetto, trembles under the weight of sacks of rotting vegetables, rancid fat, and vermin. Shapeless matter, perhaps animal, floats to the surface of Rio di San Girolamo and hovers on its greasy waters. Through the mist rising from the canal the cries and grunts of foraging pigs echo. Seeping refuse on the streets renders the pavement slick and the walking treacherous.

It was on such a night that the men came for Hannah. She heard their voices, parted the curtains, and tried to peer down into the *campo* below. Without the charcoal brazier heating her room, thick ice had encrusted the inside of the window and obscured her view. Warming two coins on her tongue, grimacing from the bitter metallic taste, she pressed them to the glass with her thumbs until they melted a pair of eyeholes through which she could stare. Two figures, three storeys below, argued with Vicente, whose job it was to lock the gates of the Ghetto Nuovo at sunset and unlock them at sunrise. For a *scudo*,

he guided men to Hannah's dwelling. This time, Vicente seemed to be arguing with the two men, shaking his head, emphasizing his words by waving about a pine torch, which cast flickering light on their faces.

Men often called for her late at night—it was the nature of her profession—but these men were out of place in the ghetto in a way she could not immediately put into words. Stealing a look through the protection of the eyeholes, she saw that one was tall, barrel-chested, and wore a cloak trimmed with fur. The other was shorter, stouter, and dressed in breeches of a silk far too thin for the chill of the night air. The lace on the tall man's cuff fluttered like a preening dove as he gestured toward her building.

Even through the window, she could hear him say her name in the back of his throat, the *h* in Hannah like *ch*, sounding like an Ashkenazi Jew. His voice ricocheted off the narrow, knife-shaped ghetto buildings that surrounded the *campo*. But something was wrong. It took her a moment to realize what was odd about the two strangers.

They wore black hats. All Jews, by order of the Council of Ten, were obliged to wear the scarlet *berete*, to symbolize Christ's blood shed by the Jews. These Christians had no right to be in the ghetto at midnight, no reason to seek her services.

But maybe she was too quick to judge. Perhaps they sought her for a different purpose altogether. Possibly they brought news of her husband. Perhaps, may God be listening, they had come to tell her that Isaac lived and was on his way home to her.

Months ago, when the Rabbi informed her of Isaac's capture, she was standing in the same spot where these men stood now, near the wellhead, drawing water for washing laundry. She had fainted then, the oak bucket dropping from her arms onto her shoe. Water soaked the front of her dress and cascaded onto the paving stones. Her friend Rebekkah, standing next to her under the shade of

the pomegranate tree, had caught Hannah by the arm before she struck her head on the wellhead. Such had been her grief that not until several days later did she realize her foot was broken.

The men moved closer. They stood beneath her window, shivering in the winter cold. In Hannah's *loghetto*, dampness stained the walls and ceiling grey-brown. The coverlet that she had snatched from the bed and wrapped around her shoulders to keep out the chill of the night clung to her, holding her in a soggy embrace. She hiked it higher around her, the material heavy with her nightmares, traces of Isaac's scent, and oil from the skins of oranges. He had been fond of eating oranges in bed, feeding her sections as they chatted. She had not washed the blanket since Isaac had departed for the Levant to trade spices. One night he would return, steal into their bed, wrap his arms around her, and again call her his little bird. Until then, she would keep to her side of the bed, waiting.

She slipped on her loose-fitting *cioppà* with the economical movements of a woman accustomed to getting ready in haste, replaced the coverlet over her bed, and smoothed it as though Isaac still slumbered beneath.

While she waited for the thud of footsteps and the blows on the door, she lit the charcoal brazier, her fingers so awkward with cold and nervousness that she had difficulty striking the flint against the tinder box. The fire smouldered, then flared and burned, warming the room until she could no longer see clouds of her breath in the still air. From the other side of the wall, she heard the gentle snoring of her neighbours and their four children.

Peering through the eyeholes, now melting from the heat of her body, she stared. The tall man, his voice strident, pivoted on his heel and strode toward her building; the stout man trotted behind, managing two steps for each one of the tall man's. She held her breath and

willed Vicente to tell them what they wanted of her was impossible.

To soothe herself, she stroked her stomach, hating the flatness of it, feeling the delicate jab of her pelvic bones through her nightdress. She felt slightly nauseated and for a joyful moment experienced a flicker of hope, almost like the quickening of a child. But it was the smell of the chamber pot and the mildew of the walls playing havoc with her stomach, not pregnancy. She was experiencing her courses now, and would purify herself next week in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath that would remove all traces of blood.

Soon she felt vibrations on the rickety stairs and heard mumbled voices approaching her door. Hannah wrapped her arms around herself, straining to hear. They called her name as they pounded on the door, which made her want to dive into bed, pull the covers over her head, and lie rigid. From the other side of the wall, her neighbour, who had delivered twins last year and needed her rest, rapped for quiet.

Hannah twisted her black hair into a knot at the back of her head, secured it with a hairpin. Before they could burst through the entrance, she flung open the door, about to shout to Vicente for assistance. But her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry of surprise. Between the two Christian men, pale as a scrap of parchment, stood the Rabbi. Hannah backed into her room.

Rabbi Ibraiham kissed his fingers and reached up to touch the *mezzuzah*, the tiny box containing Scripture fastened to the right-hand side of her door jamb. "*Shalom Aleichem* and forgive us, Hannah, for disturbing you." The Rabbi had dressed in haste; the fringe of his prayer shawl dangled unevenly around his knees, his yarmulke askew.

"*Aleichem shalom*," she replied. She started to put a hand on the Rabbi's arm but stopped herself just in time. A

woman was not to touch a man outside of her family, even when not having her monthly flow.

“These men need to talk with you. May we come in?”

Hannah averted her eyes as she always did in the presence of a man other than Isaac. They should not enter. She was not properly dressed; her room could not contain all four of them.

In a voice pitched higher than normal, she asked the Rabbi, “Your wife is better? I heard she was suffering from the gout and has been in bed since last Shabbat.”

The Rabbi was stooped, his clothes redolent with the fusty odour of a man lacking a healthy wife to air them and ensure he did not sit hunched all night reading over beeswax candles. Perhaps, Hannah thought, Rivkah had finally gone to the Jewish quarter in Rome to live with their eldest son, as she had often threatened.

The Rabbi shrugged. “Rivkah’s hands and feet remain immobile, but, alas, not her tongue. Her words remain as cutting as a sword.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

The Rabbi’s marital troubles were not a secret from anyone in the ghetto within earshot of their apartment. He and Rivkah had not enjoyed a peaceful moment in their forty years together.

“Gentlemen, this is our midwife, Hannah. May she be blessed above all women.” The Rabbi bowed. “Hannah, this is Conte Paolo di Padovani and his brother Jacopo. May God his rock protect them and grant them long life. The Conte insisted that I bring him to you. He asks for our help.”

Our help? Hannah thought. Did *she* deliver sermons? Did the Rabbi deliver babies?

“But as I have explained to the Conte,” said the Rabbi, “what he asks is not possible. You are not permitted to assist Christian women in childbirth.”

Only last Sunday in the Piazza San Marco, Fra Bartolome, the Dominican priest, had railed against

Christians receiving medical treatment from Jews, or as he phrased it, "from enemies of the Cross."

The Conte tried to interrupt, but the Rabbi held up a finger. "Papal dispensation, you are going to tell me? Not for a humble midwife like Hannah."

This time it seemed the Rabbi was on Hannah's side. They had common cause in refusing the Conte's request.

The Conte looked to be in his fifties, at least twice Hannah's age. Fatigue showed in his hollowed cheeks, making him appear as old as the Rabbi. His brother, perhaps ten years younger, was soft and not as well made, with sloping shoulders and narrow chest. The Conte nodded at her and pushed past the Rabbi into the room, ducking his head to avoid scraping it on the slanted ceiling. He was large, in the fashion of Christians, and florid from eating roasted meats. Hannah tried to slow her breathing. There seemed to be not enough air in the room for all of them.

"I am honoured to meet you," he said, removing his black hat. His voice was deep and pleasant, and he spoke the sibilant Veneziano dialect of the city.

Jacopo, his brother, was immaculate, his chubby cheeks well powdered, not a spot of mud disgracing his breeches. He entered warily, placing one foot ahead of the other as though he expected the creaky floor to give way under him. He made a half bow to Hannah.

The Conte unfastened his cloak and glanced around her *loghetto*, taking in the trestle bed, the stained walls, the pine table, and the menorah. The stub of a beeswax candle in the corner guttered, casting shadows around the small room. Clearly, he had never been inside such a modest dwelling, and judging by his stiff posture and the way he held himself away from the walls, he was not comfortable being in one now.

"What brings you here tonight?" Hannah asked, although she knew full well. The Rabbi should not have led



the men to her home. He should have persuaded them to leave. There was nothing she could do for them.

“My wife is in travail,” said the Conte. He stood shifting his weight from one leg to the other. His mouth was drawn, his lips compressed into a thin white line.

The brother, Jacopo, hooked a foot around a stool and scraped it over the floor toward him. He flicked his handkerchief over the surface and then sat, balancing one buttock in the air.

The Conte continued to stand. “You must help her.”

Hannah had always found it difficult to refuse aid to anyone, from a wounded bird to a woman in childbirth. “I feel it is a great wrong to decline, sir.” Hannah glanced at the Rabbi. “If the law permitted, I would gladly assist, but as the Rabbi explained, I cannot.”

The Conte’s eyes were blue, cross-hatched with a network of fine lines, but his shoulders were square and his back erect. How different he appeared from the familiar men of the ghetto, pale and stooped from bending over their second-hand clothing, their gemstones, and their Torah.

“My wife has been labouring for two days and two nights. The sheets are soaked with her blood, yet the child will not be born.” He gave a helpless wave of his hand. “I do not know where else to turn.”

His was the face of a man suffering for his wife’s pain; Hannah felt a stab of compassion. Difficult confinements were familiar to her. The hours of pain. The child that presented shoulder first. The child born dead. The mother dying of milk fever.

“I am so sorry, sir. You must love your wife very much to venture into the ghetto to search me out.”

“Her screams have driven me from my home. I cannot bear to be there any longer. She pleads for God to end her misery.”

“Many labours end well, even after two days,” Hannah said. “God willing, she will be fine and deliver you a healthy son.”

“It is the natural course of events,” the Rabbi said. “Does not the Book of Genesis say, ‘In pain are we brought forth’?” He turned to Hannah. “I already told him you would refuse, but he insisted on hearing it from your own lips.” He opened his mouth to say more, but the Conte motioned for him to be silent. To Hannah’s surprise, the Rabbi obeyed.

The Conte said, “Women speak of many things among themselves. My wife, Lucia, tells me that although you are young, you are the best midwife in Venice—Christian or Jew. They say you have a way of coaxing stubborn babies out of their mothers’ bellies.”

“Do not believe everything you hear,” Hannah said. “Even a blind chicken finds a few grains of corn now and again.” She looked at his large hands, nervously clasping each other to keep from trembling. “There are Christian midwives just as skilled.”

But he was right. There was no *levatrice* in Venice who was as gifted as she. The babies emerged quickly and the mothers recovered more speedily when Hannah attended their *accouchements*. Only the Rabbi understood the reason, and he could be trusted to keep silent, knowing that if anyone discovered her secret she would be branded as a witch and subjected to torture.

“Now from her own lips you have heard,” said the Rabbi. “Let us depart. She cannot help you.” He gave a brief nod to Hannah and turned to leave. “I am sorry to have disturbed you. Go back to sleep.”

Jacopo clapped his hands together as though they were covered with dirt, rose from the stool, and started toward the door. “Let us go, *mio fratello*.”

But the Conte remained. “I would bear Lucia’s pain myself if it were possible. I would give my blood to replace

hers, which as we waste time talking is pooling on the floor of her bedchamber.”

Hannah’s eyes were level with the buttons of his cloak. As he spoke, he swayed from fatigue. She took a step back, afraid he would topple on her.

She lowered her voice and said to the Rabbi in Yiddish, “Is it unthinkable that I go? Although Jewish physicians are forbidden to attend Christian patients, they often do. Christians needing to be purged or bled turn a blind eye to the Pope’s edict. Many Jewish doctors are summoned under the darkness of night and slip past sleeping porters. They say even the Doge himself has a Jewish physician ...”

“Such tolerance would never extend to a woman,” the Rabbi replied. “If a Christian baby was, God forbid, to die at birth, and a Jewish midwife was attending, she would be blamed. And along with her, the entire ghetto.” The Rabbi turned to the Conte and said, speaking again in Veneziano, “There are many Christian midwives in Venice. Any one of them would be honoured to help.”

Paolo di Padovani looked pale in the dim light of the room. “You are my last hope,” he said in a soft voice. “They say you have magic in your hands.” He picked up Hannah’s hands and clasped them. His own hands felt cold, the palms soft as kid leather. Hers were rough from lye soap and hard well water. “Is that true?”

Embarrassed and shocked, she pulled her hands away.

The Rabbi leaned toward her and said in Yiddish, “Is this what you want, Hannahlah?” He used her childhood nickname. “Your body tipped from a barge some night into that part of the lagoon where no fishing is allowed and where no one may draw drinking water?”

A prudent woman would not reply. But Hannah could not hold her tongue. “Is the suffering of a Christian woman different from the suffering of a Jewish one?”

“Tell this illustrious Conte that you cannot help him. Let his wife’s death be laid at the door of someone other than a

Jew.”

The Rabbi was ignorant of what it meant to be female: to bear stillbirths, to suffer puerperal fever, to hear the rustle of the wings of the Angel of Death over cradles and birthing stools. Hannah took a deep breath and said, “I have a talent, Rabbi. Surely God wants me to use it.”

“I curse the day you brought your, your ...”—he floundered in search of the right word—“your device to me and asked me to make a *brokhe*, a blessing, over it.”

Hannah regretted it too. If only she had kept her creation a secret.

“He is rich,” the Rabbi continued. “A merchant and a Christian. Every man, woman, and child in the ghetto will pay the price if this child dies under your care.”

The Conte said to the Rabbi, “I can protect her if, God forbid, there is trouble. I am a member of the Council of Ten and I have friends in the Courts of Inquisition.” He made an effort to encourage her. “Ready yourself, Hannah, and come with me under cover of darkness, in my gondola. No one outside my household will know of your attendance.”

The Rabbi muttered in Yiddish, “Hannah, you do not know the world as I do. This will not turn out well. Yes, he wants you now. Yes, he will protect you now. He and his lofty Council of Ten. But do you think for one moment that he will give a fig about you if his wife dies?”

Hannah tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. The Conte had ventured into the canals at night, courted disaster from roving bands of ruffians, bribed Vicente to unlock the gates, and roused the Rabbi from his bed. Few husbands would take such trouble. She glanced at the Rabbi, whose black eyes, below wiry eyebrows winging up toward his bald head, fixed her with a scowl. He was blocking the door, standing in front of her with the air of a man who would not step aside for God Himself.

When Hannah's sister, Jessica, converted to Christianity in order to marry a gentile, who later abandoned her, the Rabbi had, in accordance with Jewish law, ordered the family to sit *shiva*, the traditional mourning ritual for the dead, and to never utter her name again. "Jessica, may her name be obliterated and the teeth rot in her head," he had said as Hannah wept and her father covered the family's only looking-glass. The Rabbi had forbidden anyone in the ghetto to have contact with Jessica from that moment on.

Her sister lived only a few canals away. Hurrying to the Rialto market at dawn, Hannah had often crossed paths with Jessica as she made her way home from a party or fancy dress ball, attired in a gown of rich silk, sequins, and a mask. Each time, obedient to the Rabbi's injunction, Hannah would duck her head and take another route.

A year later, a midwife's apprentice arrived at the gates of the ghetto, out of breath from running, to summon Hannah to Jessica's confinement. The Rabbi barred Hannah from accompanying the apprentice and chased her away.

The Rabbi addressed the Conte now. "With all due respect, the authorities cannot always protect the Jews when the priests foment trouble. You and I would not have to ponder the matter long to think of examples—during outbreaks of the plague, when the infidel pirates seize Venetian ships ..."

If he heard the Rabbi, the Conte gave no sign, shrugging off his cloak and laying it on the only space available, the bed. A look crossed his face, and for a moment Hannah thought he would wrap her up in his cloak, sling her over his shoulder, and carry her out into the night.

"Conte," said Hannah, "I do not perform miracles, nor is there magic in my hands."

"You must try," he replied.

Jacopo tugged at the Conte's arm. "Come. Let us go. We were fools to think a Jew would help. Holy Mother of God, Paolo, I will leave without you if I have to." He held his

handkerchief to his nose. "The smell of this room is making me quite nauseous. Paolo, conclude this matter. Offer her money. This is the only thing Jews understand."

Hannah should have been accustomed to such remarks—she heard them often enough. But she whirled on him, ready to say the first thing that came into her head, to curse him as the whore son of a pig. Instead, she cleared her throat and addressed his brother.

"Conte, pay me two hundred ducats and I will go to your wife."

Jacopo let out a snort of laughter.

Hannah kept her eyes fixed on the Conte, who was not laughing. His eyebrows knit together as he pondered the demand. It was a shocking sum. Two hundred ducats was sufficient to buy a hundred bolts of printed silk, a cargo of timber, or Isaac's life. No one, not even a nobleman, would pay such an amount for her services. A few silver coins was her usual fee.

This would end the discussion and send the Conte back to his palazzo. The Rabbi was right. If Hannah failed to save the Contessa, the Inquisition would force her to submit to the *strappado*. Her hands would be bound behind her back and she would be dropped from a great height.

Hannah said, "My husband is being held as a slave in Malta by the Knights of Jerusalem. They demand this sum for his ransom. I will try to save your wife's life if you will save my husband's."

The Rabbi was angry now, his voice slow and deliberate. "Hannah, as I have told you, the Society for the Release of Captives will fund Isaac's release. It is only a matter of time."

"Time is running out," Hannah said.

The Rabbi shook a stiff, blue-veined fist in her face. "Your first obligation is to do nothing to endanger the ghetto. Isaac is only one Jew; the ghetto is three thousand." He was so close Hannah could feel the heat of his breath on

her face. "I am your Rabbi and I forbid you. That is the end of the matter."

These were the hands that had blessed her many times, had circumcised her brothers, and had held the silver *kiddush* cup to her lips at Seder dinners.

"Rabbi, I did not stand under the wedding canopy with three thousand Jews. I stood under the *huppah* with one man—Isaac." Her husband, she wanted to add, who had married her without a dowry, and had continued to love her in spite of her barrenness. In the synagogue, she had overheard the Rabbi assuring Isaac that the law would release him from a childless marriage. The Rabbi had urged him to divorce her and find a wife who would bear him a son. Isaac had pulled his prayer shawl more tightly around his shoulders and shaken his head. Most husbands would not have shown such patience—for is not a child the *takhlit*, the purpose of all women?

And how had she repaid this husband who, when she was aching from bending for hours over the trestle bed of a labouring woman, would take the *bahnaches* glasses from the cupboard, heat them over a candle, and apply them to her back? In the week before Isaac sailed, she had hurled at him an arsenal of wounding words—said that if he loved her he would not sail to the Levant in search of wealth and prosperity, that he thought only of himself and was deserting her. The words he flung back were like knives. He told her that she was a timid little ghetto mouse, afraid of taking a chance, that he was risking his life for her, for a better life for both of them. Then there was silence between them. They did not look at each other, and slept far apart in bed. She had refused to see him off in his ship, *La Dogaressa*. Now the thought of him alone in Malta, believing she no longer loved him, was more than she could bear. If the Conte would pay, she would go with him. The Rabbi could be as angry as he wanted.

"Will you pay what I ask?" she said to the Conte.

“I will pay this outlandish sum,” he replied. “You can sail to Malta and ransom your husband before they work him to death in the stone quarries.” He picked up his cloak.

Hannah had no time to be astonished by his agreement. She draped a scarf over her hair and slipped on her thin leather sandals as Jacopo and the Rabbi watched. The Rabbi was silent but his frail old body was rigid with fury.

“Take me to your wife,” Hannah said to the Conte.

She hurriedly gathered her equipment—an apron, an iron knife, clean gauze, vials, swaddling cloths, packets of medicinal herbs, and a silver amulet, a *shadai*, inscribed with the Star of David, meant to be hung over the cradles of newborns. *May it not be too late; may it be needed tonight.* She placed her supplies in a bag made of unbleached linen. But before she pulled the drawstring closed, she raised the lid of her *cassone*, patterned in bright marquetry, reached in, and quickly took out a long and narrow object wrapped in cloth. A corner of the material fell away and the light of the candle caught the sheen of her birthing spoons, two silver ladles hinged together. Her face, drawn and white, reflected in the bowl of one of the spoons. Before the men noticed, she tucked them into the bottom of her bag under the swaddling cloths.

Her birthing spoons could save babies, but they could also maim. At a recent confinement, she had exerted too much pressure and had crushed the skull of the baby instead of easing it out. The mother was left with a tiny blue corpse to cradle in her arms. If Hannah made the same blunder tonight, she would be denounced as a slayer of newborns.

“Brother,” said Jacopo, “you are a fool and I will not be a witness to it a moment longer. I will take leave of you.” He bowed from the waist as well as a man so stout was able. “I have need of some fresh air. I will make my own way home.”



The stairs creaked as he descended and then the door at the entranceway slammed. Hannah wondered at Jacopo's risking his life on the streets alone at night. Roving gangs of ruffians were commonplace—a well-dressed man might be robbed of his clothes and then shoved off a bridge into the fetid waters of the canal. But she said nothing.

“Come, we can be at ca' di Padovani in a few minutes. My gondola is moored on Rio di San Girolamo,” the Conte said.

The Rabbi pulled his prayer shawl higher around his shoulders. Hannah waited for him to move from the doorway, but he did not. He glared at her. When he slowly raised both his bony hands to her face, she thought for an instant he meant to strike her. Instead, he made slow circles above Hannah's head, as he davened from the waist and said in Yiddish, “May God in His Greatness guide you. Be a credit to the Jews and to all women, Hannah. Do not bring destruction upon us.”

The Rabbi then stepped aside to allow her and the Conte to pass through the door.

Once outside, the Conte draped his cloak, smelling of tallow smoke and sweat, over her shoulders. “It is damp on the canals tonight.”

She sagged under the weight of the fur-trimmed wool.

Clutching to her breast the linen bag containing her birthing spoons, she marched in the wake of the Conte toward the gondola. The Rabbi followed closely behind. She could not help remembering the incident that had occurred last Purim at a house on the Calle del Forno. The midwife attending the birth had been unable to turn the fetus into proper position. To save the mother's life, the midwife had used a *crochet* to pierce the baby's skull, and then had used a silken cord to rip the arms and legs from the child's body in order to extract it. Tiny limbs had been strewn about the woman's bedchamber, tossed there by the

midwife in her panic. Hannah prayed the same spectacle would not greet her tonight.

## CHAPTER 2



DURING THE FULL moon, unseen currents ran in the canals, washing over the crumbling walls and wetting the slimy steps of the ghetto. At high tide, *acqua alta*, the entire *campo* disappeared under a layer of mud. Tonight was such a night. Hannah held up her skirts as she, the Conte, and the Rabbi made their way across the *campo* toward the gates, the Conte grasping her elbow to prevent her from slipping in the silt. Overhead in her building, shutters opened. A tiny flicker of a candle showed through the window and then the shutters banged closed. Hannah shivered as a rat leapt into the canal, leaving greasy ripples in the water.

The Rabbi bid them good night, and headed in the direction of his *loghetto*. Then, except for their footsteps on the cobblestones, the silence was complete.

When they reached the heavy wooden gates, the guard Vicente, his hat upturned in case the Conte wanted to drop a few *scudi* in it, unlocked the gate leading to the Ponte degli Agudi. The Conte and Hannah hurried toward the boat on the Rio di San Girolamo. The gondolier was snoring so loudly he had scared away the pigs rooting in the garbage along the Fondamenta. He woke up when he heard them approach and sprang to attention, offering his forearm to Hannah to help her over the gunwales. Then he

held to one side the heavy brocade curtains of the *felze*, the cabin of the gondola, until she settled in a chair. The boat dipped and swayed when the Conte climbed on board. Inside the *felze*, it was dark as a cave, concealing her from anyone who might be watching on land. The seclusion should have made her feel safe, but it did not.

When the gondolier cast off, she wanted to hurl herself out of the boat and onto solid ground again. On the prow the six iron teeth of the *ferro*, each tooth symbolizing a *sestiere*, a district of the city, sliced through the water. They did not speak. The only sound was the drip of the oar as they glided over the black waters. No light reflected from the houses of the Cannaregio.

When they reached the Grand Canal, hardly a pine-pitch torch hissed or flickered from the docks of the splendid palazzi. The Conte's cloak was heavy around her shoulders, pressing her down. It did not warm her any more than a hunter's snare gives heat to a trapped quail. She struggled to sit upright. It would avail her nothing if the Conte realized how frightened she was. Confidence must radiate from her. Isaac had taught her that.

Was not the flesh of a Christian noblewoman fashioned the same as a Jewess's? she thought. Did they not bleed and moan and labour in the same manner? Did they not also have tight wombs that refused to expel their contents, and babies who presented buttocks first? She had enticed unwilling infants from half-dead Jewish mothers; she would do the same for a Christian. It was for Isaac that she risked a watery cell below the Doge's palace and a midnight visit from the strangler. His handsome face appeared before her, his aquiline nose and sensual mouth.

In the cabin of the gondola, listing to one side with the weight of its load, the Conte spoke to her in a voice so low she had to ask him to repeat it. "My wife, Lucia, is frail. For years, she has coughed blood. In spite of this, she has had many confinements. None have resulted in a living child."