



BRIXEN

Eager to find a prostitute after a long trip from Rome, Father Heinrich Institoris walked into a beer hall in Brixen called Agnello Macellato—the Slaughtered Lamb. Brixen was only a seven-day ride from Rome in good weather with a convenient stopover in Florence. However, after heavy rains, the town was a mess of mud, and it had taken the priest over two weeks to arrive. Brixen was also the first territory within his jurisdiction where he could enjoy hunting witches.

Fattened cows and bleating pigs vied for street space with villagers. Barefoot peasants hawked fabrics stolen from merchants on their way from Burgundy. Blacksmith apprentices watched their lessons in shacks which gave off black smoke as the clanking of iron against iron could be heard echoing. Streets were nothing more than roughhewn planks thrown down over open sewer ditches stinking of wet dung.

Brixen was in the County of Tyrol well north of Venice, but south of Salzburg. It bore the hallmarks of Bavaria with a slightly milder climate. Villagers looked more Swiss than German, but being at the crossroads of Europe, it was not uncommon for foreign travelers to stop on their way to locations as far as Munich, Milan, or Florence. Nonetheless, Heinrich stood out both for his striking clerical garb and his severe countenance.

Once inside the rowdy beer hall, Heinrich walked directly up to a chubby barmaid with enormous breasts cinched tightly in her blouse, her arms holding a number of dripping steins.

“Would you like some wine, Father? Third one is on the house at the

Slaughtered Lamb. Always is! Spiced and sweetened with odds and ends, perhaps? You won't like our beer though. Tastes like piss, if you ask me."

"I do not wish to partake in these . . . frolics," he replied, teeth clenched. "I am looking for a harlot."

The chesty woman laughed. "What man isn't? Talk to Frau Keffer." While clutching the steins, she tried to point to a seated woman who was cackling at minstrels' bawdy songs. Dressed in baggy garb, they stood beside the tables, regaling the guests with song for a small donation. The lyrics were inside jokes to the townsfolk, who laughed uproariously. Refrains were repeated as a chorus by the inebriated guests.

Heinrich walked straight over to the matron, who looked up at him but continued laughing. She shouted over the din, "Don't look so glum, Father Sourpuss—join us for a drink and a laugh!"

His crystal blue eyes glinted. He never seemed to blink.

"Find me a girl."

"Hah! Men so rarely get right to the point! I can't say I don't find that attractive! Will cost you six gulden."

"You will receive a gold florin and not one more," he said.

She paused, considering the offer, then nodded her acquiescence. The flint-haired priest reached into his black robe and yanked out a leather pouch containing a substantial number of freshly struck gold coins. He plucked one out and handed it to the woman, who inspected it and buried it snugly in her purse.

"I prefer florins anyway, the gulden's gone all to hell." She pointed at a girl on the far side of the room. "Girl's name is Flores. She's seated near the fire. Beautiful, wouldn't you say?"

The priest glanced over at the girl, a painfully thin woman half his height who was sprawled across the gray slate of the hearth. She was covered in sores and bruises, and lesions oozed on her skin.

"Perfect. Direct us to a private chamber."

"She'll bring you up herself." The woman looked him up and down again and then went back to laughing at the minstrels mocking the townsfolk.

Heinrich walked over to the stone hearth. Other young girls lay around. They reeked of perfume.

The waif looked up at him. "I am Flores, the little flower. Shall we go upstairs?"

"Immediately."

"Ooooh, a man eager to be pleased." She took his hand. "Follow me."

Flores was the least desirable prostitute in the hall. But for his purposes, she was perfect.

Drunkards, misfits, and grimy old men huddled around barrelheads in the corners of the room, playing games of chance. Dice was never a fair game here since the poor light in the tavern facilitated trickery by professional cheaters.

The grim priest and prostitute walked up to the second floor and into a room. He closed and barred the door behind them. They could still hear the singing and yelling downstairs as well as the sounds of drunks arguing and roughhousing. Tobacco smoke wafted into the rafters. The room was dimly lit and stank of alcohol, vomit and urine.

"All right then, Father. Out of them saintly robes," she said wistfully. She started to untie her blouse. Her breasts were ample for such a pitiful waif.

"No." He stood at some distance with the closed door behind him. "We are not going to engage in any perverse or illicit pleasures. Do you know who I am?" The priest's icy eyes flickered in the candlelight. He slowly approached her.

"No, sir . . . but please do not hurt me." She re-tied her top and inched away towards the open window.

"I could not possibly do to you the violence you have already done to your immortal soul. You are Christian?" His gaze never left her eyes.

"Yes, Father. Before she died, my mother raised me to follow the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin."

"Wouldn't your own mother want to save your soul from the fires of hell? Would she not want your virtue to shine, rather than for you to die a godless harlot in this pit?"

"My mother never wanted this life for me, Father. But not even God

can save me from my sins.” The girl sat down on the floor and began to weep into her hands.

“Flores, have you heard of Magdalene?”

The girl looked up and shook her head.

“Well,” he explained, “she was a filthy siren just like you. She was almost destroyed for her sins, and she would have rightly deserved it. But Jesus forgave all her sins, as terrible as they were.”

She sniffled and wiped her nose, her tears subsiding.

“How did she get forgave?”

“Well, He absolved her because she changed what she was. But it takes more than that. It takes a *sacrifice*.”

“A what?” she asked.

“An angel spoke to me last night about you in a dream. That is why I came here to see you. The angel told me that you need to do something to become a good Christian again and for God to forgive your terrible sins.”

“He did?” Flores’ eyes widened. “What did the angel say I have to do?”

“The angel told me that you have to hide in an oven.”

There was a long pause.

“An angel told you that?” she asked skeptically.

“The angel said that you and I must combat the powers of the Devil here in Brixen. Lucifer himself has taken control of the hearts and minds of many people in this town and God wants to put a stop to his power here. You surely want to combat evil, do you not?”

“How does me climbing into an oven do that?” Years of prostitution had made her defensive, even toward priests.

“The people in this town have lost all their fear of God,” he explained. “What you will do is restore their grace, because only you know the villagers’ secret sins. Many of the Devil’s followers in this town have hurt and abused you for years, have they not?”

“It is true.” She began to cry again. “They done terrible things to me and the other girls. You have no idea how awful they have been to us. Even the mayor.”

“And I think you know which are the thieves, liars and hypocrites.”

She sniffled again. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the same men who pollute you on a Saturday evening here are praying Sunday morning at Mass.”

“I know which men are thieves and liars, but . . . I am scared of them.”

“If you pretend to be Satan speaking from inside that oven, you can accuse the evil people in this town of their own secret sins. I will take care of the rest.”

He knelt beside her and put his hand on her bony shoulder.

“You will be safe; no one will know it is you. Together we can put a stop to their sins and save their souls from hell. They must be led back to the Lord’s flock. And if you do that, if you save a single soul in this town from hellfire, then all your sins will be forgiven and forgotten. The angel of the Lord told me that this is your sacrifice.”

He stood up, his tone turning from warmly persuasive to cold. “And if you do not do it, you will be discarded by God and burn in hell forever.”

She kissed his outstretched hands. “I will do what the angel said. I do want to be God’s helper. I don’t want to go to hell.”

“Excellent. Meet me at the friary tomorrow at daybreak. I will show you the oven. You will see—God will be pleased.”