

# THE BOOK OF SECRETS

*ANNA MAZZOLA*



ORION

Dedication here



# I

Rome, 1659

## *Girolama*

The angels stare, stone-eyed, at the casket. Their chiselled faces are smooth and untroubled, as they are throughout the many funerals, marriages and baptisms that take place beneath them every day. Mostly, this past year, it has been funerals, for the plague has swept through Rome and the mosaic of states that make up Italy. Now, though, the plague is silent, having burnt itself out. It is not plague that killed this man.

On the floor of Santa Maria del Popolo, Girolama watches the mourners as they walk past the body laid out for burial, bowing their heads, murmuring. Some touch the arm or gloved hand of the willow-tall young woman who stands near her dead husband's casket, her face shrouded in a black veil. Behind her waits another woman: older, broader, but with a similar bearing. This, Girolama, thinks, must be the widow's mother, for her protective gaze doesn't leave her daughter.

There are two young men by the casket now. They're peering too closely, speaking in a manner not suited to a funeral, to the death of a man who died at just thirty years of age. Death

might have ravaged Rome, the plague carrying off the good and the evil and the young and the old, but it has, in Girolama's experience, not inured people to it. They still grieve as deeply as they ever did, each loss a puncture to the soul. These two young men, though, seem untouched by grief or pity. They might be visiting the waxworks at a fair. She hears one say, 'What rosy cheeks! He looks better in death than he did in life. I'd say it rather suited him.'

Under her breath she curses them, wishes them down to the devil. They know nothing. They understand nothing because they're young, confident males and haven't experienced what she has, nor what these women have. They have little idea what it takes to survive in a city made by, and for, men. She wishes that the earth would swallow them up, but there's only one man who's going into the ground today, and he is long past caring.

Once the people have paid their respects, the church workers begin pushing their pikes into the black and white rosettes that bloom on the flagstone floor. The smell is immediate – the noxious breath of death released as the floor is raised, for this is the lid to the common grave. The ground beneath the church is divided into a honeycomb of coffins and corpses: a whole house of the dead lying beneath the living. Even if the women had wanted to, they couldn't have buried him elsewhere. The chapels and tombs are the preserve of the rich. Most of Rome's dead reside in this subterranean city.

The priest and the chaplains have withdrawn, as have the mourners. Only the workers and the women remain, and the perfect Madonna, robed in crimson, her arms open wide as if to comfort them. As Girolama watches the body being lowered by ropes into the pit beneath, she wonders what secrets the man takes with him to his grave, for in life there are secrets

we write down in books, others we pass on, and yet others we carry with us to our deaths.

She crosses herself, then leaves the church. Outside, the sky is a pale, scrubbed blue.