

Alchemy's Daughter

By Mary A. Osborne

Chapter 1

The Tutor

“Too much learning is vanity,” Santina’s older sister put forth. She threw open the shutters, admitting the early morning light, before covering her hair in a serviceable white wimple. “Mama would not have approved.”

Lauretta always seemed to know what Madonna Adalieta, who had been taken by the Lord three years earlier, would have thought. Santina considered her sister’s admonition as well as the fact that Lauretta, who was twenty, would soon be married to a portly, balding, and widowed apothecary. After Lauretta moved away from their home on Via San Giovanni, Santina would have more time to hide away undisturbed with her precious books. There was nothing wrong with young women seeking out knowledge. In fact, Madonna Adalieta would surely have approved of her lessons with Calandrino.

Santina’s father, Iacopo Pietra, was the first to befriend the young scholar; the two met while hunting wild game in the woods near the friary. Although Papa was fully occupied with the business of importing cloth and overseeing his two stores, he shared Calandrino’s interest in the subject of alchemy. Before long the two had taken to working together in the attic room of the Pietras’ home, measuring and mixing salts and metals, trying to make gold.

He is the most learned man in San Gimignano, san jee mee NYAH noh, Papa always said. He could speak Latin, Arabic, Greek, and French. Calandrino, an orphan, was given to be raised by the good friars of San Damiano, although he was not called to the mendicant life and took no vows. When he was just ten years old he went to Sicily to serve as a page for Sir Ugo, a knight of the Hospitaller Order of St. John. Sir Ugo had been to the Holy Land years before, and he had taught Calandrino wondrous things about alchemy and Arabic medicine.

Calandrino, five years Santina's senior and possessed of many gifts, was unlike the other men in her village, for he encouraged her ambition to improve her mind. No doubt Madonna Adalieta would have done the same. "Mama read Dante. She taught all of us Latin," Santina reminded Laretta. She pulled a mulberry-colored gown over her head. "She would not begrudge me an education."

"Pay me no heed if you will, but you will never find a husband if you persist in this manner."

"The jeweler from Certaldo might marry Santina," offered Isabella, who was arranging her pretty blonde hair in numerous braids and ribbons, trying to copy the style of a noblewoman she had seen. Santina's youngest sister, who was in love with the blacksmith's son, regretted that she was fourteen and too young for marriage. "I heard him asking Ruberto about you at the store," she said when Santina looked at her skeptically.

"I have no interest in marrying," she mumbled. The mere mention of the jeweler soured Santina's mood, not because the man was distasteful in any particular respect, but because he was the unexceptional type of man Papa would choose for her. Trying to put

the jeweler out of her mind, Santina picked up Aristotle's *De Caelo*, "On the Universe," and started out the bedroom door.

"Not yet," Laretta called. She held up Mama's illuminated *Book of Hours*, which contained devotions to be read at various times throughout the day. Obediently, Santina paused to pray.

When the hour of *prime* finally neared, Santina gladly left Laretta and Isabella to the work of candle making and departed for her lesson. Although it was less than an hour's journey by foot to Calandrino's cottage, young ladies did not travel unescorted and Giacomino was made to accompany her. Giacomino was the son of Margherita, who had served as Mama's beloved maidservant and now tended to Mama's daughters. He seemed more like a brother to her than Papa's employee, and he made no secret of his disdain for the task to which he had been assigned.

"I'll be missed at the shop," he complained, as they started out on Via San Giovanni.

"I am grateful to you for taking time away for my sake," she replied. It was the truth, even though she knew full well that Giacomino often wandered off to his favorite food stalls, taverns, and bakeries when he was meant to be delivering cloth.

With Giacomino lagging a few steps behind, Santina hurried along the route she had taken countless times. It was a summer-like May morning, the main road was perfumed with a pungent mix of ripe cheese, fresh-baked bread, butchered meats, horse dung, and human sweat. Santina moved through the thoroughfare that was crowded with merchants selling their wares, housewives carrying baskets, gentlemen in wide-sleeved tunics and assorted hats, ladies in bright-colored dresses, a cleric en route with a holy

relic, and barking dogs. She paid little heed to Giacomino's mood or the townsfolk who bid her *buon giorno*, for her thoughts were all of her morning lesson with Calandrino.

Although she tried to reflect upon her assigned reading and prepare a clever discourse, Santina thought mainly of the wonders of the young scholar and the joy of another Wednesday beyond the village wall. Papa paid Calandrino a few *soldi* each week for tutoring Santina, although it was Calandrino who had initially proposed the arrangement. Having taken note of Santina's keen intellectual curiosity—as well as her appearance in her new ladylike gown, she dared to hope—Calandrino thought to offer lessons in Greek and philosophy. While Papa was not convinced that Santina's imaginative mind required improvement, he knew that the promising young scholar was in need of additional funds.

Calandrino had recently returned to the quietude of his beloved Tuscan countryside following his fourth year at the University of Bologna. Although he had not yet completed his studies, his reputation as a scholar had grown. He had a patron, Master Leolus da Firenze, who was a physician in Bologna. Master Leolus had charged him with the translation of certain writings by the Arab philosopher and physician, Avicenna, concerning the treatment of wounds. Despite his rising stature, Calandrino had not forgotten Papa or his interest in the art of alchemy. Upon his homecoming, the two promptly sequestered themselves in the attic room where they resumed their alchemical experiments. With Calandrino's many commitments in mind, Santina felt honored that he chose to serve as her tutor on Wednesday mornings.

Continuing past Papa's draper's shop en route to the scholar's home, Santina reached the busy city square with the octagonal well in the center, the Piazza della

Cisterna. Years ago, when Mama went to the square to do the marketing, Santina used to play with her sisters on the stone steps leading to the well. Sometimes she would gaze off into the distance at the soaring brick towers built by Tuscan nobility long before she was born, and she would imagine the world that existed beyond those towers, beyond the village wall, beyond all of Tuscany.

Now, at seventeen, Santina gladly departed the square and soon passed beneath the Roman arch of the north city gate. She traveled along the Via Francigena, the road that led all the way to France, into the hills of rolling Tuscan countryside, and moved up along rocky terraces planted with vineyards and olive orchards. When at last she came to a wide expanse of grassy meadow, the enormous bell tower of San Damiano came into view. She had been here before with Papa on numerous occasions. It was the place where Calandrino once pointed out the St. John's wort growing wild.

The herb-filled meadow fronted the scholar's one room cottage—timber frame with stones around the door and windows—on the outskirts of the friary grounds. Santina thought the tiny shelter that belonged to the brothers of San Damiano was quite splendid, but Laretta thought it peculiar that such a learned and refined young man chose to reside beyond the wall.

Upon arriving there was no need for Santina to knock on Calandrino's door, for she spotted him even before she crossed the meadow. Giacomino, having safely delivered his charge, disappeared into the surrounding wood without a word to Santina, whose eyes were fixed upon the scholar. Bow in one hand, pheasant in the other, there was little about Calandrino's appearance that suggested a life committed to the study of natural science and philosophy.

“Buon Giorno, Santina!” the tall, broad-shouldered young man with a tousled mass of black curly hair called out as she stared at him from across the field. He wore long breeches and a coarsely woven sleeveless tunic, revealing arms grown strong and brown from physical labor out of doors. As he strolled toward her, she was almost certain he would sweep her into his arms and kiss her.

Chapter 2

Madonna Adalieta

Santina had perhaps loved Calandrino since she was fourteen, since the day she ran to find him after Mama had gone into labor. She knew that Madonna Adalieta was having some sort of problem, and she thought Calandrino might have a remedy that could help. In her youthful imagination, she somehow hoped he would share with her the alchemist’s secret, the philosopher’s stone that could restore health and reverse misfortune.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” she said, out of breath, when she reached the cottage on that dreadful day.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, his lighthearted expression turning sober when he saw the look on Santina’s face.

“Mama’s having the baby, but something’s the matter.”

“Surely the midwife has been summoned?”

“Trotula can’t seem to help her. But I thought...I thought you might be able to,” Santina began, “if you could give her the philosopher’s stone.”

“The philosopher’s stone,” he repeated. “What do you know of the philosopher’s stone, Santina?”

“I know it is not a stone at all, but the elixir of life,” she replied. “It is said that those who drink the elixir are granted eternal youth and forever changed, but I think the potion is only a powerful healing draught.”

“You have been eavesdropping,” he said, smiling just a little.

Too worried about Mama to feel embarrassed by his accusation, Santina merely shrugged. It was true she often spied Papa and Calandrino as they conducted their experiments in the attic room that served as Papa’s “bottega,” or alchemist’s workshop.

Calandrino did not comment further upon the stone and instead began to speak of the Egyptians and the origins of the ancient science. Walking beside the scholar, Santina waited for him to finish his story about Osiris, a beloved pharaoh of Egypt, who was killed by his evil brother, chopped into fourteen parts and thrown into the Nile River. Beautiful Isis, his wife, came to search the water and collect the fragments of the corpse and then magically unite them. In this way Osiris was reborn.

Santina understood, to some degree, that the Egyptian legend of death and rebirth had something to do with alchemy and the mysterious process of turning

lead into gold. But at the time, she had little patience for Calandrino's tale. She just wanted him to give her the elixir that would help her mother.

"Those who died and went through the ritual of the resurrection could move freely between life and death. They could appear in any shape, any day," Calandrino waxed lyrically as he referred to the Egyptians. "The dead could leave their coffins and walk out of the tombs of the pyramids in broad daylight. They could appear as crocodiles and swim in the Nile or turn into birds like the ibis and fly through the sky."

Calandrino spoke of what was written in the papyri of the Egyptian prayers for the dead, and Santina imagined the ability to transform, to change shape, to be able to walk through closed doors, to defy death. She was not sure what to think of the Egyptian mysteries, but she could envision an eternal kingdom where sickness and death no longer reigned. It was a world where Mama would always be safe.

"Do you have the stone then, Calandrino?" she asked the instant the young man had finished talking. "Can you help my mother?"

As though suddenly remembering Madonna Adalieta's plight, Calandrino looked downcast. "I'm afraid not, Santina," he said. "But I will pray to the One who gives life to all things. You must also."

Then he picked up a red stone flecked with gold and black. Pressing the stone into Santina's hand, he said, "There are many things we might not understand in this world, but the truth of God's love is pure and simple, just like this stone."

As she had that fateful day three years earlier, Santina looked expectantly at Calandrino. Her heart sank when he began talking about a new book he had been loaned by one of the friar's at San Damiano. Although she had hoped for an altogether different sort of welcome, she sat beside him beneath the shade of a flowering pear tree and tried to listen attentively.

"*The Book of Thoth*," he said, handing her a slim volume from a small collection of texts strewn across the grass.

Santina thumbed thoughtfully through the pages, taking time to study the strange images of human figures with animal heads, long-legged birds, and undecipherable characters bearing significance she could not begin to fathom.

"Who is *Thoth*?" she asked, wanting to understand the significance of the text.

"To the Egyptians he is represented by the ibis god, but the Greeks know him as the great sage, Hermes Trismegistus." Indicating the image of a figure with a birdlike head, he said, "Thoth was said to be one of the early kings—the inventor of hieroglyphics, the father of alchemy. His work has inspired all great thought. He's older than Plato. Older than Moses even."

Santina tried to absorb the weight of Calandrino's words. Her mind flooded with images of ancient Egypt, open deserts, palm trees, and tall pyramids. It was as though the text had flown from that faraway place into her hands. "I'd like to read this *Book of Thoth*. It would take me far from San Gimignano, I'm sure."

Calandrino smiled at the thought. "The book speaks of the highest reality and the spiritual path that prepares one to receive the greatest of truths."

“Might the book hold the secret to the philosopher’s stone?” she asked. Although Santina no longer envisioned the stone as a healing draught that could restore health to the sick—as she had wanted to believe when Mama was dying—she imagined it to be an elusive bit of knowledge that held the key to the transformation of human suffering as much as the transmutation of the base metal.

“There is surely wisdom to be found within the pages, but the text does not promise to unlock the *Great Secret*. That book has yet to be found.”

Santina returned to *The Book of Thoth* and studied the curious images. She wanted to ask him more about this mysterious book from Egypt, but the original lesson plan for the day seemed to dawn upon the young man. In a more measured tone he began to speak of *De Caelo* and the perfect motions of the spheres.

“Is it true?” Santina asked. “Do you believe such perfection exists?”

Calandrino appeared to contemplate her question as he stood and casually plucked a sprig of pear blossom. Sitting beside her again, he playfully tucked the spring flower behind Santina’s ear. It was a simple gesture, and yet to an infatuated young woman it was as though he had offered a token of his undying love. Besotted, Santina gazed upon the scholar as though he was the only one who existed for her.

Perhaps aware, for the first time, of the beautiful young woman before him, Calandrino’s expression registered surprise and, finally, understanding. As though examining a rare flower, he looked into her soft gray eyes and touched her silky brown hair. “*Si*. Most certainly.”

Santina did not look away shyly but dared to return his stare. Calandrino Donati was four years her senior and would eventually return to the University. Regardless, she

hoped something more would come of their friendship. Papa thought highly of him and might very well approve the match, never mind that Calandrino was a scholar.

“I do, too,” Santina murmured. “I think there is perfection in this world.”

Calandrino hesitated before resting his hand on her shoulder. As he drew her close she was startled, but she never thought to resist the young man who was her tutor. Out in the sun his kiss tasted warm and sweet, and Santina thought there could be nothing more she would ever desire. *This must be love*, she thought as Calandrino’s arms encircled her. The two tipped over and fell laughing to the ground, intoxicated with the scent of spring and the inspiring words of long dead philosophers.

Recollection of the outside world seemed to dawn upon Calandrino, who pulled himself away, regret in his eyes. He tried to speak of Aristotle, but Santina could not easily pay attention. She could only look at him longingly until Giacomino returned for her. When Calandrino handed her *The Book of Thoth*, Santina was not sure how she would endure the long wait till the following Wednesday.

As she began to make her way home that afternoon, she felt nothing would ever be the same again. God had seen fit to grant her this earthly happiness. She had only walked a few paces down the road when she turned to look at Calandrino once more. He had already returned to his texts. Perhaps it was the work of Avicenna that recaptured his attention.

In the back of her mind Santina was aware of the inherent obstacles to her clandestine romance. She was expected to marry the usual type of man—such as Taddeo da Certaldo—not a poor scholar who popped in and out of San Gimignano on occasion. But Santina had no desire to contemplate an end to something that had only just begun.

Papa can be persuaded, she told herself as she walked to village. On that lovely May afternoon, Santina did not pause to consider Calandrino's view of the future or the ways of a dedicated scholar.

When Santina and her sisters were children, Mama had warned them never to visit the public fountain alone. Although the cool water beckoned on hot summer days, one never knew who would be visiting the spring, located just outside the city wall, or what people were up to in the baths. Of course women did their laundry in the basins, and bathing was permitted when Mama or Papa was present. On a scorching hot day in July of 1343, Santina thought to ignore Mama's warning and walk alone along the *Via delle Fonti*, the steep road leading to the fountain.

It was Friday at midday when most everyone in San Gimignano rested, but thoughts of Calandrino kept Santina wide awake. As an excuse to visit the fountain, Santina carried a few handkerchiefs and linen chemises to wash. Continuing along the road, she briefly contemplated *The Book of Thoth* given to her by Calandrino. She tried to cultivate, as the sage advised, the proper orientation of the mind required to see the true face of God. However, her attention soon turned to her new romance, to Calandrino's touch, to the way he smiled and said *mia cara*, my darling, in greeting.

The scholar had come to occupy the center of Santina's thoughts through the hot days and nights of that summer. Neither her father nor sisters were privy to the romance, but Giacomino surely knew what his master's daughter was about. Although Santina

recognized the risk of being discovered, she imagined the revelation would only hasten her betrothal to Calandrino, an outcome she perceived as inevitable.

As she imagined her future with the scholar, the heat seemed to rise in waves from the diaphanous hills and the cool water within the stone basins beckoned. Santina, wearing a fine gown sewn of the lightest pink silk and her hair in a heavy braid wound over her head like a crown beneath her veil, imagined the pleasures of the cooling waters.

The road she traveled curved alongside a series of Romanesque arches that enclosed the forbidden springs. Santina rounded the bend and made her way to a stone ledge beneath one of the arches. As she sat on the ledge, she saw a vision as though from a dream: there within the basin stood Calandrino.

He appeared not as his former self, but as a magnificent sculpture of antiquity, half naked in linen breeches as he washed his clothes in the bath. She almost felt as though she ought to apologize for the intrusion or at very least look the other way. But she could only stare, mouth agape, at the sight of his tawny skin and muscles like carved stone flecked with glints of sunlight.
