

**Nina Blazon**

**Fiery Red**

**Chapter One: THE DEVIL’S WEATHER**

*A fulgure, grandine et tempestate.  
Libera nos, Domine Jesu Christe.  
Ostende nobis, Domine, misericordiam tuam.  
Et salutare tuum da nobis.  
Domine, exaudi orationem meam.  
Et clamor meus ad te veniat.*

*From lightning, hail, and tempests.  
Deliver us, Lord Jesus Christ.  
Show unto us Thy mercy, O Lord.  
And grant us Thy salvation.  
O Lord, hear my prayer.  
And let my cry come to Thee.*

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S WEATHER PRAYER**

The servants spent the entire day anxiously hanging around the window. Madda watched as the cook crossed herself again for the tenth time as she looked at the stormy yellowish gray sky, slunk back to the hearth and spit into the embers for good measure before mumbling a prayer of petition to herself. But it wasn’t just the elderly Gret who prayed

for the city to be spared another storm. For weeks, the fall weather had been acting up. In the last few days, the fog that hung over Ravensburg was so heavy, you could barely see your feet, let alone be able to recognize who approached in the streets and alleys.

On some of these foggy days, Madda shivered at the image that the spirits of the deceased were haunting the city: lost souls had been allowed to leave purgatory for a while to warn the living not to sin. The unusual fog disappeared at night, but what now loomed over the steeples in Ravensburg was no less dire: grotesque faces emerged from the clouds; the sun was only a blurry speck peeking out from behind the dark gray wall. Even in the middle of the day it was dark in the family home of Humpis, the merchant. Even the kitchen seemed darker than usual and the house was abnormally quiet. The elderly master of the house, Onofrius Humpis, had gone to the merchant's shop. His wife, Barbara, on the other hand, withdrew after the doctor's visit and was praying, even though she didn't seem to find much peace of mind in it. The eerie calm before the storm seemed to magnify every sound in the house, every creak of the floorboards. Earlier when Madda put more wood on the fire in the stately part of the house, she could hear the stern mistress of the house restlessly pacing back and forth. *She should really be resting and regaining her strength*, Madda thought to herself.

“Even the fire is cringing!” Greta took the metal hook which she usually used to pull the soup kettle over the fire towards her, and poked sullenly around in the embers. In the light, the wrinkles on her face appeared twice as deep. “And you really want to go to the lower town, Madda? This is the Devil's weather; wild horses couldn't drag me there.”

“Don't talk like that; the mistress doesn't like to hear such things,” Madda retorted. “There's already enough gossip in town.”

“Is it any wonder?” growled Gret. “This constant storm and the fog, no proper summer, half-rotten harvest – who wouldn’t believe that something’s not quite right? We’re still lucky. We’re living like bees in clover here in our master’s place, but outside, the farmers are starving. Even the day laborers who can’t get any work since there isn’t anything to harvest, are faring badly. Look at the sky! If you’re unlucky, another dreadful storm will arrive again and will catch you on the way.”

“I think the weather is past us. And if not, then I’ll just need to be faster than the lightning and rain. I absolutely have to get home.”

*And I am definitely not going to give up my afternoon off,* she added to herself. These hours were an unexpected gift. She wouldn’t miss visiting her sisters and father for anything. She didn’t dare wait any longer. *Or was it already too late?* Immediately she became anxious again. Suddenly she couldn’t secure the hair which slipped out of her braid fast enough.

“You think you can escape the lightning? Who do you think you are?” ranted Gret. “Mind your arrogant tongue. Otherwise the hail will strike you down in the middle of the road, just like Hans, who was lame. Don’t you remember how the poor guy looked when they hauled him off to prison? The storm smashed his nose and every tooth left in his mouth to pieces.”

“The storm tore a branch off the linden tree which struck him, not the hail, Gret. And a guy from the tavern broke his nose, because Hans tried to cheat him out of his money. If the old crook hadn’t been so drunk, he wouldn’t have lay in the alley, snoring, after the brawl. Then he could have saved himself from the hail.”

Gret was old, but she was still nimble. When she whirled around and swung at Madda with the wooden spoon, she was just able to dodge it. “I tell you, sometime someone is going to give it to you because of your smart mouth, Magdalene,” scolded the cook.

Laughing, Madda stood out of harm’s way next to the shelf filled with jars of spices. “I’m just speaking the truth. Everyone knows that Hans spent all of his panhandled money on schnapps. And when he ran out of money, he tried to cheat the people in the tavern using his marked cards. He just fell into the wrong hands.”

“What you know and what you say are two entirely different things,” grumbled Gret as she turned toward the fire again. “And you never speak ill of the dead.” She let out a long sigh and stirred the fish stew, simmering in the copper pot in front of her. “Will you look at that! What a waste. The young master and mistress eat like birds. Beno eats practically only bread and Elisabeth seems to have forgotten that a girl on the hunt for a groom shouldn’t be stick thin.” She shook her head uncomprehendingly. “According to the physician, Lady Barbara shouldn’t eat fish anymore and her husband embraced this preposterous fasting restriction too. But who bothered to tell the cook before she put the pot on? No one!”

“You know what’s been going on in the house yesterday and today.”

Gret’s face was concerned as she crossed herself again. “You don’t need to tell me. Lord, have mercy on the poor soul.”

Even Madda’s heart sank as she thought of her poor mistress who prowled around the house like a ghost, pale and stony-faced. It was odd that it was precisely because of this terrible misfortune that Madda had been given an afternoon off. That’s why she

planned to pray for her mistress. *But first I have to go home*, she thought as she grabbed her small wicker basket.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Gret continued gruffly, “this oh-so-educated physician might know how to bleed the inside of your arm, but he needs to stay out of my kitchen. What kind of nonsense is that to prohibit Lady Barbara from eating smoked eel? Any idiot knows that eel fat draws fever and infirmities out of the body. I told her, but she just shrugged her shoulders and gave the eel to me. It would be good for my health. ‘You’re the one who needs it, Mistress,’ I answered. ‘You have to get well, not me. This old Gret’s knees just twinge – and sometimes my conscience.’ At least that made her laugh. But then she trudged back to her prayer book instead of getting into bed. But even the mother of a stillborn child has still just gone through labor, I say. But no one listens to me.”

She stirred the stew so fiercely that broth sloshed over the edge and drops of fat hissed on the hot copper. The smell of chervil and bay was enticing.

“Don’t worry about the food,” Madda consoled. “Nothing ever goes bad in this house. Maybe Lord Onofrius will bring some of his business partners for dinner. Or the merchants from Italy will arrive today. Then a pot of soup will definitely barely be enough.”

She put the wool shawl around her shoulders and carefully set her apples into her basket. She was already looking forward to giving them to her siblings. In times like these, apples for someone like them were delicacies, even though the fruit had already been stored in the cellar for weeks and had shriveled. Ever since the most devastating hailstorm in as long as anyone could remember had struck, there had been little to

harvest; the storm had laid waste to the Schussen valley for years to come. Fruit trees and grapevines had been stripped by the fist-sized balls of hail. Since then, very few apples grew on the trees or any vines on the cane. And, of course, Madda was afraid of another thunderstorm. But she only had to think about the small, pale face and a much greater fear crept over her. *What if she got there too late?*

“I’ll be back again before the sun sets,” she said, hoping to leave already, but Gret called her gruffly.

“Kindly, wait!” She set aside her soup spoon and wiped her hands on her apron. With a moan, she walked slowly toward the oak table where the knife still was that she used to cut up the fresh fish. Gret pulled back a cloth on a wooden platter. The aroma of smoked fish made Madda’s mouth water. A dried out black fish face stared at her. The mouth of the eel was wide open as if it wanted to fight back against the human hand wrapping it in the cloth.

“You take it,” Gret said and unceremoniously added the small eel to the apples in Madda’s basket.

“You’re giving me the whole fish?” Madda asked in disbelief.

“Not you, you greedy pig. It’s for your sick one. So she’ll be on her feet again soon.”

Now Madda had to swallow hard. Not just because the cook’s gift was so generous, but above all, because the elderly woman talked about Marie as if she really could get healthy again.

“Thanks, Gret!” Madda said from the bottom of her heart. “You really are a good soul!” The cook motioned reluctantly. “Yeah, yeah,” she growled in her curt manner.

“Now get going before the mistress changes her mind and puts you back to work. You’d deserve it too, you changeling. And don’t talk to any strange fellows on the way!”

Market Street seemed to be empty today. The few people who were out, were in a hurry. Apparently no one trusted this sky. In the distance, the sign on an inn squeaked on its loose chain. The wind even played with the bell that tolled for condemned men hanging in the small alcove on the town tower that served as both watch tower and gate for the upper town. This soft, irregular tinkling was especially unsettling. Usually the clear bell only rang out in the upper gate when a convict was being led to his execution. Madda looked up at the October sky with concern. Clouds chased above the rooftops.

She ran downhill over the uneven cobbles. In this nice part of the upper town where the patricians and rich citizens lived, the garbage wasn’t piled up to the windows. Rain constantly washed the filth down to the town and many of the cat’s head cobbles were worn smooth by the soles of expensive shoes – and were slippery in spots. Near the inn, Madda almost slipped on a couple of rotten cabbage leaves that were probably left over from the market. She caught herself at the last moment – and gasped for breath as a sharp gust of wind came out of nowhere and hit her in the face. It was unbelievably cold and it ripped the shawl from her shoulder. She pressed herself into a doorframe for protection and waited for the thunder and lightning, her heart pounding. But she only heard the echo of the pounding hoofs and the squeal of a thin pig being driven along the street by a man with a staff. Not a bit of rain. *And wind alone doesn’t make a storm.* Nevertheless, Madda was uneasy. *Go back?* No, she was already to the town hall and from there it was just a stone’s throw to the lower town.

Clattering and clapping got closer. Just then an elderly monk came into the street from a side street. He led a harnessed donkey by a rope. His cart clattered over the cobblestones and the chest on it jerked back and forth. The white habit flashing out under the open black cloak indicated that the gaunt monk belonged to the Dominican Order. Obviously the man had already gone a long way because the hem on his habit was covered in mud and he leaned on a walking stick. The sight of him made Madda forget about the storm. The old man didn't raise his eyes toward heaven in fear, nor did he hurry his donkey along, rather walked leisurely uphill toward the upper gate. When he saw Madda and she called out "God be with you" to him, he nodded slowly and continued on as if there wasn't a storm to be afraid of. That was reassuring.

Madda leapt back into the street and fought against the next gust which swept out of a side street. She flinched as a shadow, something enormous, dark lunged at her. Then a blow to her shoulder sent her flying. Wiry hair brushed her mouth, the smell of horse sweat caught in her nose. As she fell, she perceived her basket falling from her arm. Apples danced from it – and at the last moment, she got out of the way of a hoof which was a hair's breadth from pinning her hand down on the ground. "Hey!" she yelled. "Watch out!" In one leap she was on her feet and safe. The horseman she ran into had his hands full trying to control his horse. It shied away from Madda and tossed its head as if it were going to rear up. But finally it stopped, quivering as if after a long run, its coat steaming and covered in sweat. It was a sorrel from a breed Madda had never seen before: enormous with a curved swan-like neck, a graceful head and thick feathering on its muzzle and fetlocks. And the rider was clearly a patrician. His long coat alone suggested that. It was an overcoat whose broad fur collar draped across the man's

shoulders. An expensive silver clasp held the coat together. The stranger also wore finely crafted gold-colored leather gloves.

“*Madonna mia!*” he called and laughed. “*Che brutto tempo, ha?*”

Madda was still trembling in shock. She couldn’t understand a word, but she recognized the language of the Italian business partner who had been a guest over the summer at Humpis’ house. *I startled his horse and shouted at him.* And as if that weren’t already bad enough, the pig broke away from his driver and was going for the stray apples with a greedy grunt. Of course now it would be impossible for her to run off and rescue the apples – especially since the horse blocked her way. “Excuse me, Sir, I didn’t mean to frighten your horse,” she said, making a quick shaky curtsey. At the same time she was able to pick up the furtive eel that had also fallen into the street.

The man jumped off his horse. Until then she had only perceived his face as a silhouette against the blazing sky. Now it was Madda who was surprised at how young he was – maybe only two or three years older than she was, no more than twenty. A young patrician with blonde curls springing out from under his yellow hat to his shoulders. He was remarkably handsome, had thick curved brows and a mouth that her sister would certainly call an angel’s mouth.

His horse pulled on the reins, but this time he was able to steady him with a firm jerk. He examined her brazenly. His gaze stayed decidedly too long on the rise of her breasts. She wanted to cover herself better, but it wasn’t until now that she noticed that the knot had come undone and the shawl had slid off her shoulder. The hair she had so hastily tied up had worked its way loose; long dark brown strands fluttered in the wind

and exposed her neck. And immediately the distinguished gentleman grinned and raised an eyebrow meaningfully. Madda blushed in anger and shame.

Hastily she reached for the shawl where one end was already in the street filth, and with one hand, quickly gathered her hair into a bun which she crammed under her shawl. But then the wind whirled her skirt up and exposed her legs to her knees. “Look, a whirlwind!” Someone whistled; laughter rang out behind her. Madda looked over her shoulder. Obviously it wasn’t just two young men stopped when they came out of the inn. Windows opened in the neighboring houses. Gawkers poked their heads out. Of course no one wanted to miss such drama: a foreign aristocrat, a skittish horse, a pig on the hunt for apples – and a girl trying to control shawl and skirt in the wind. To top it all, the monk on the other side of the street also stopped and was watching the goings on with a stern expression.

“Stop gaping under a respectable maiden’s skirt!” Liese, the apothecary’s wife, stuck her head farther out of the second floor window and flailed a wooden broomstick at the two smirking drinking buddies standing right behind Madda. “Help her pick up her apples instead, you gawkers!”

“Someone else already is,” retorted one of the guys, grinning as he pointed to the pig that was trotting toward the nearest apple with its ears bobbing.

“Keep that pig away from my apples!” she shouted at the driver. But he just spat. “Then don’t throw anything at my sow’s mouth.”

“Your thieving beast should get an upset stomach from it,” Madda spluttered in exasperation. The man snorted, but he didn’t make even a half-hearted attempt to recapture his animal.

“Well, don’t mess with a wild mare, if you aren’t wearing any spurs, fool!” one of the two men called maliciously to the driver. His companion laughed as if he were drunk. Liese ranted that they should take off; the driver wasn’t going to take the loud mouth’s remark either, and yelled and waved his staff about. Only the foreigner didn’t care an iota about the commotion; he scrutinized Madda from head to toe.

“*Sei una Eva, hm?*” he said.

“I . . . don’t understand, sir.”

The onlookers’ eyes got even bigger when the Italian bent forward as if he would indeed pick up Madda’s basket lying next to his horse’s front hoof. But he just took out the only apple still in the basket and stood up again. Madda could only stand by and watch, gnashing her teeth, as he took an appreciative bite from the fruit. “I say: you are an Eve,” the stranger repeated then. He placed the wrong emphasis on the words, but he had at least learned German well enough that he could be understood. With the apple he bit into, he pointed to the eel, which she hid in the crook of her arm. The cover over it had slipped; the head of the fish jutted out and the wide open mouth seem to snarl at the Italian. “That’s the snake,” the stranger explained. “And in my hand I’m holding *la mela di Eva* – Eve’s apple. But if she were as beautiful as you, then I would be more than happy to have been led into temptation like Adam.”

Madda grit her teeth. Didn’t he have any sense of decency? If he had just been any old fellow, then she would have given him a piece of her mind. But rebuking a patrician? However she couldn’t completely bite back an answer. “This apple isn’t from the Garden of Paradise,” she responded politely, but firmly. “Rather from a farmer’s

orchard on the lake. And this snake has fish bones and could have at most seduced Adam and Eve to sample the watercress, noble sir.”

The stranger’s eyebrows rose in surprise. He probably had to translate Madda’s Ravensburg dialect first– then he laughed. But his eyes narrowed and he examined her even more closely than before. Maybe it was due to the cool wind, but Madda shivered uneasily. This stranger’s eyes were light brown, almost golden. But in the slate-colored light of the clouds, they appeared yellow. Calmly he took another bite from the apple – and then shoved the rest of it into his horse’s mouth. Madda’s hand clenched her shawl tighter. *My good apples!*

The foreigner looked up at Liese. “Where does Onofrius Humpis live?”

Arms swung out of the windows, every index finger pointed uphill toward the Obertor town gate. Now it finally all came together for Madda. *He is Lord Onofrius’ guest! So the merchants from Genoa have arrived.* This man was part of that; he certainly was one of her employer’s Italian business partners. *But why is he en route without an escort?*

“Just follow the maiden, Madda, sir,” called Liese. “She’ll take you there. She’s one of the servants.” The guest thanked her with a nod and tried again to mount. But his horse began to prance and step to the side. Madda retrieved her wicker basket before he could trample it. Then she took a few more steps to safety. Obviously, with that, the show was over. Windows were closed, the man driving the pig made his animal move on with blows from his staff and clicks of his tongue. Only the Dominican monk on the other side of the street didn’t move. He didn’t look at the Italian at all, only at Madda. She flinched at the monk’s stern and glowering expression. He had gray, unusually bushy eyebrows

and a deep frown line on his forehead. His lips were pinched together, a grimace of mistrust. *What have I done?* Madda thought, astonished. She looked down and couldn't find anything improper.

“What are you waiting for then, girl?” called Liese. “Get on home!”

Madda swallowed. *That's exactly where I want to go. Home.* But it didn't help. The Italian already had one foot practically in a stirrup. The hours off were forfeit. And foreign guests with their strange habits and special requirements always meant a lot of work.

Madda tried to hold back her tears. That would be the last straw for this conceited gentleman to see her crying! She set the eel in the basket and quickly retrieved a couple of apples. There weren't many; the onlookers had probably picked up some of the fruit too. One was on the other side of the street – right in front of the donkey cart. Of course the donkey had discovered the treat and was already reaching for it. But Madda hesitated walking over to the monk because he stared at her with such hostility. Then his gaze fell on the apple. He could have picked it up, but Madda watched with dismay as he pulled the donkey roughly by the rope and shoved the fruit with his walking stick with a disgusted expression: as if he didn't want to touch the apple at any price. Then he struck the donkey roughly, the animal jerked and the cart clattered uphill. Madda immediately dove for the rolling apple before hurrying back to the aristocrat. He didn't seem to be in any hurry though.

“So your name is Madda,” he remarked from up on his horse.

“Magdalene, noble sir,” she answered. “That's my Christian name. Magdalene Weißhaar.”

“*Bene,*” he said pleasantly, but with the casual arrogance of a patrician who was used to orders. “Is it still a ways to the house?”

“No. Just a piece up the road.”

The Dominican monk with the donkey cart was already some distance in front of them. When he heard the clatter of the sorrel’s hoofs behind him, he lifted his bony shoulders up almost to his ears and drove the donkey on as if he wanted to put as much distance between him and Madda as possible.

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*At least Gret will be pleased to have hungry guests,* thought Madda dejectedly. She had to continue to choke down her tears of disappointment. But as soon as she thought of Marie, she lost her self-control. “That’s the house,” she murmured, furtively wiping her cheeks.

“Ah, the famous dogs.” The Italian stopped his horse and considered the coat of arms on the door’s blind arch. Three noble dogs had been cut into the stone, lean greyhounds with open mouths and long tongues. Even the circular iron door knocker was topped with the head of a dog. Gret told Madda that decades ago, the master had brought this special door knocker from his very first business trip to Italy. Madda was just about to grab the ring when the door was suddenly torn open. And out tumbled ... the young Master Beno.

Madda jumped back, startled. Never before had she seen the master of the house’s grandson without a book in his hands – and never before had she seen him so lively. He

stopped abruptly, but they still almost collided. *It seems to be my lot today to run into important gentlemen one after another*, she thought.

Master Beno wrinkled his brow. “Magdalene,” he said surprised. “Back so soon?”

He peered over her head, up and down the street, to where the monk’s cart clattered away. *Was he watching out for the monk?* It looked as if Beno wanted to go past her, but the snorting of the horse made him stop. He turned around and saw the Italian. He jumped out of the saddle and in all seriousness, held out the reins with an imperious gesture toward him.

“My horse needs to be taken care of immediately and my traveling bag needs to be brought to my room,” he commanded. “*Signor Onofrius* is expecting me. Announce Lucio Malaspani di Genova.”

Madda held her breath. The Italian mistook the young master for a servant! Beno just raised his left eyebrow.

“Didn’t I express myself clearly?” the Italian asked annoyed.

Madda involuntarily took a small step back. But the young master surprised her a second time by, in fact, taking the reins and with a nod of his head, gave a hint of a bow. “Very clearly, *Signor Malaspani*,” he said slowly. “Your horse will – as are all civilized guests – be well taken care of. Go in; the master will receive you directly.”

Obviously the Genoese was deaf to the mocking undertone; he nodded briefly and smiled at Madda.

“Thank you for showing me the way, *Bellissima*,” he said, and stepped over the threshold without giving Beno another glance.

*Save the pretty words*, Madda thought grimly. *I know your type*.

Both looked after the guest. As always, Beno remained cool and composed. No emotion showed on his slender face; only his bluish gray eyes flashed in disapproval.

*This Malaspani should get ready for a rough ride*, thought Madda.

As if he heard her gloating thoughts, Master Beno turned toward her. “Go to the kitchen, Magdalene. Let Gret know. She should prepare a meal immediately and shouldn’t skimp on the green pepper.”

Madda nodded. “Yes, sir.” *I’ll never see Marie again*. Quickly she lowered her head. She had forgotten her heartache for a minute, but now it returned with a vengeance.

Beno wrinkled his brow. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying at all. It’s just the wind.”

“You’re not a good liar, Magdalene.”

She looked up at him, caught. But he didn’t seem annoyed; there was just this infinite seriousness. He scrutinized her as he stroked the horse’s mane with a friendly gesture. His eyes were like oceans, calm and clear, but with depths that hid more than many suspected. Gret always said, the young master was like an eagle: he always saw further than anyone else in the house. “Eel fat for weakness in the limbs and paralysis?” He pointed to her basket. She nodded tentatively. She could hardly imagine that he knew for whom the remedy was intended. But then he surprised her a third time.

“Will Marie come through it?”

His directness and his compassion touched her. *He knows? But from whom? Gret?* And why is he concerned about something like that?

“I . . . hope so, Master Beno. And I pray every day for a miracle. But no one knows if she’ll ever be healthy again.”

Beno looked skyward in concern. The wind died down somewhat, but the air still tasted of rain. “Hurry. Then maybe you’ll make it without getting wet.”

Madda’s mouth fell open. “But ... that’s impossible; I have to stay here. The guest ... and Lady Barbara. And Elisabeth surely needs me for ...”

“Don’t worry about it; I’ll take care of it. Get going! And if it’s raining or there’s a thunderstorm, spend the night with your people, do you hear me? A maidservant who is killed by lightning or dies from a cough isn’t of any use. Just see that you’re back tomorrow for mass.”