

# Clare & Her Sisters

LOVERS  
OF THE  
POOR  
CHRIST



MADLINE PECORA  
NUGENT, SFO





Clare  
and  
Her Sisters

*Lovers of the Poor Christ*



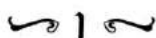
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PART ONE



To Set Out on the  
Path of the Lord





## *Lady Ortolana di Favarone*

**Bedroom, Offreduccio House, Assisi, Italy** (LATE JANUARY, 1200) ~

In her dreams, Lady Ortolana di Favarone smelled smoke. Despite the haze that engulfed her and her galloping chestnut palfrey, Ortolana could see herself clearly, her long, slender legs gripping her mount, sidesaddle, her firm, narrow nose, small chin, wisps of blond hair around her prim cap. A plodding line of ox-drawn carts, piled with goods and servants, magically kept pace with Ortolana's rushing steed.

She was racing toward the flame-engulfed, towering, red rock castle of Sasso Rosso, home of friends Lord Leonardo di Gislerio and his family. Flames turned everything red and orange as Ortolana dismounted and pulled loaves from her saddlebags while servants grabbed blankets, pottery, weapons from the carts. Suddenly, Ortolana's servants mutated into a mob of Assisi merchants and artisans. Shouting, they flung the goods at the castle, laughing as each item burst into flame against the walls.

Merchants from the marketplace, the Mercato, were throwing grappling hooks over the walls, climbing through flames, pulling down the house. In a billow of black smoke, Sasso Rosso crumpled like a child's tower of blocks.

The mob disappeared. Terror stricken, covered with ash, Ortolana was standing in smoldering rubble with Lord Leonardo, his lady, children, and servants. Dainty, five-year-old Lady Filippa was clutching a charred doll with which she and Ortolana's daughters often played. As Ortolana attempted to wipe it clean, the doll crumbled to soot.

The Gislerios disappeared. Now the smoking rubble was that of Ortolana's house and in it, as dumb eyed as oxen, stood Ortolana, her husband Lord Favarone, and their children—six-and-a-half-year-old Lady Clare, almost three-year-old Lady Catherine, and toddler Lady Beatrice. Instantly, pudgy, tow-headed Clare, wearing a scarlet dress, was alone in the prayer chapel, its fire-riddled wall

tapestries wafting smoke into a clear sky as the chapel burst into flame. A bright spark floated upward from where Clare had been. As Ortolana reached for the glowing cinder, it vanished against the sun.

Ortolana shrieked and awoke.

She was in her dark bedroom.

Through the cracks in her tightly shuttered windows came shouts and the dancing light of flames. The dream must be real.

For centuries, nobles, lords, and knights, like her own family and the family into which she had married, had ruled Assisi. Now the common people challenged that order. Barely two years ago, they had forged a new city government, a commune. Far more merchants, artisans, and farmers than nobles made up the commune. These lower classes had attacked and burned Sasso Rosso and several other castles and had chosen as governor their own consul in place of the emperor's appointed official.

Now the mob must intend to burn this immense Offreduccio house.

When his father Count Offreduccio di Bernardino died, Lady Ortolana's husband Favarone had inherited this house and much of the count's huge estate. Daily, after early morning Mass in the prayer chapel, Favarone either visited his vast properties or hunted game. A quiet, stocky, raven-haired man given to squinting, Favarone could become an enraged bull if anyone threatened his household, but tonight he was away in Cannara.

Throwing back the feather coverlet and woolen blankets, Ortolana bolted out of bed, feeling for her gownlike chemise. Swiftly, she clad her body, not bothering to lace her sleeves or back. Unable to find her mantle, she ran into the torchlit hallway without it, bolting toward the main door that led into this second floor of the house. Young Ioanni di Ventura, his dark beard still fuzz, was supposed to be guarding that door. Ioanni was capable. Courageous. Alert. With deadly accuracy, he could aim his watchman's huge cross-bow. Why had he not awakened her?

Ortolana pounded at the front door. "Ioanni! Ioanni!"

"Yes, my lady," came the puzzled reply.

"What's happening out there?"

"Domina Savia escaped again, my lady. Her family is here in the piazza, trying to take her home."

Ortolana unbolted the door from the inside and cracked it open. A blizzard of driving snow swept across the Piazza del San Rufino. In front of the locked doors of the Cathedral del San Rufino milled a noisy cluster of servants and lords, torches in their hands. Above the noise came a piercing, heartrending wail. "Let me alone! You're trying to keep me away from my babies!" From the Offreduccio stable on the right, beggars, whom Favarone allowed to sleep in the stalls, were shouting, "Shut up! Go home!"

Domina Savia. When her children and husband had died from plague, the noblewoman had become crazed. Despite guards assigned to protect her, she sometimes managed to escape her household and wander pitifully through the city, crying for her dead children.

Ortolana closed the door and leaned against it, her knees weak. She was the Countess of Sterpeto, scion of the fearless Fiumi family, sister of bold Count Accarino, descendent of brave lords and knights going back to Emperor Charlemagne. Possessing great energy and faith, she had made pilgrimages to Rome, Monte Gargano, and the Holy Land, her life endangered by harsh terrain, plague, and bandits. But, because of tonight's dream, the courage that surged in Ortolana's bloodline failed her.

Ortolana sometimes had vivid dreams, each containing some truth. Although Lord Favarone had forbid her to ride to Sasso Rosso herself, he had agreed to sending provisions. Servants had described the rubble, so she must have dreamed it accurately. Yet in her dream, this house had been torched and Clare had burned to a cinder.

Terrified, Ortolana hurried through cold halls to the unheated bedrooms. The door to the children's bedroom was open. Oil lamps in the room were lit.

Lady Bona and Lady Pacifica, the Guelfuccio sisters who served the Offreduccios, stood as Ortolana entered. In the stark light, the women, wrapped in dark fur mantles, looked exceptionally pale.

Two little bodies, one plump and one thin, each wrapped in a heavy, hooded cape, plunged into Ortolana's gown. Four little arms grabbed her legs. Lady Clare and Lady Catherine.

Catherine was sobbing, her thin ribs heaving. "Mama, they're gonna bun our house like they bunned Lady Filippa's."

"We'll fight them off," Clare declared, stamping her foot.

"No, mi bambinas." Ortolana stooped and stroked the children's heads. She had to be strong. "No one is burning anything. No one is fighting anything. Domina Savia got away again. That's all."

"Oh, my God, grazie!" Pacifica dropped to her knees, her full mouth wide with a joyful smile.

Bona planted her fists firmly on her hips, her elbows jutting out from her big body like two wings. "I wouldn't put it past the mob to burn this place."

Catherine sobbed louder. "They're gonna bun us!"

"No one is burning anything," Ortolana said sharply to her lady-in-waiting. She glanced at the shutters. There was nothing beyond them but blackness. The night was still.

Ortolana put her finger to her lips. "Caterina, shh. Listen."

The only sound was Catherine's panting.

"They've gone home," Ortolana said gently. "Back to sleep." She kissed the girls, then looked up at Lady Bona. "Lady Beatrice didn't awaken?"

"One-year-olds sleep through anything," Bona said.

"Then good night," Ortolana said. "I'll put the girls back to bed."

Bona and Pacifica returned to their bedroom, which adjoined the children's room. These sisters, Ortolana's distant relatives, had served Ortolana ever since her marriage. Big boned, outspoken, and gregarious, Bona generally accompanied Ortolana about town and knew everyone's business. Timid Pacifica, a brunette whose roman nose indicated her noble background, deserved her name—woman of peace. Pacifica lived as a penitential recluse, leaving the house only to pray, attend Mass, and accompany Ortolana on pilgrimage. She spoke little and kept her eyes downcast in the presence of men so that she recognized no man in the Offreduccio household.

Ortolana slipped off the girls' capes, then tucked Catherine and Clare into their shared bed. She wrapped her chilled body in a feather-stuffed quilt from a chest at the foot of the bed, then sat on the bed and stroked her daughters' foreheads.

Sandy-haired Catherine, worn out from sobbing, fell into swift, peaceful sleep.

Under the layers of warm blankets, Clare was lying still, her eyes closed.

"Mama, if they burn our house, I'm going to fight." The child's thin lower lip was firmly set.

"Shh, Chiara. Go to sleep."

"I'm going to fight with Papa and Lord Monaldo, Lord Ugolino, Lord Scipione, Lord Paolo." All her uncles. "And Lord Martino, Lord Giorgio di Ugone, Lord Angelo di Tancredi." Her cousins.

"Shh. Go to sleep, Bambina." If Ortolana could sing, she would sing her daughter to sleep.

Clare was quiet, her eyes closed. But her little body was tense. Ortolana stroked and stroked the child's forehead and patted the snug nightcap that covered Clare's ash-blond curls.

If they burn our house.... Our house. The first-floor granary, storage rooms, kitchen. The second-floor bedrooms, ladies' sewing room, the great hall with its single hearth. The third-floor servants' quarters and family chapel.

If they burn our house.... The flames will rise above the Piazza del San Rufino, threatening the adjacent Cathedral del San Rufino. Water in the nearby fountain would be useless against the blaze. Flames might leap across the piazza, destroy the stable, the canons' residence, the Guelfuccio home.

If they burn our house.... Our servants will be homeless. Watchman. Almoner. Maids. Cook. Stablehands. Steward. Squires. Kitchen workers. Butler.

If they burn our house.... We will have to move. Familiar beggars will have to beg coins, food, and clothing elsewhere.

If they burn our house.... What will happen to Lady Clare?

Like smoke, fear billowed up within Ortolana, the same fear that had swelled within her while she was pregnant with Clare. As Ortolana stroked Clare's cheek, the memory of her first pregnancy returned. She had feared that her unborn child would die, so she had prayed unceasingly for the baby to live.

One day Ortolana had been given a sign. The day had begun ordinarily enough. Prayer. Mass. Morning work. Prayer. Midday meal. Siesta. Then four ladies had assembled in Ortolana's sewing room to stitch, chat, encourage, and counsel each other.

Young, delicate-featured Lady Alguisa, wife of Lord Giorgio di Ugone, dreamy-eyed, romantic mother of Lord Paolo and Lady Emilia, anxious to have another girl and to name her Ginevra after the queen of Camelot.



Domineering Lady Bona, whose desire to marry had been thwarted since so many knights had died in war.

Sweet and gentle Lady Pacifica, content in her secret, single life of penance.

And Ortolana.

After a few hours, the women had walked to the Cathedral del San Rufino for their daily prayers. The women's families had made the cathedral possible. Over sixty years earlier, Giorgio di Ugone's family had given property for the church's expansion. Fifteen years later, the consortium in which Count Offreduccio and Lord Guelfuccio were members did the same.

Above the altar hung a huge crucifix, Christ in glory suspended upon it, His gentle eyes smiling on those who came to worship. Ignoring the shouts and banging of workmen enlarging the cathedral, Ortolana knelt, her eyes fixed on the Lord's face, shadowy in the semi-darkness. On this hot, sultry day, Ortolana, big with child, was weary. Closing her eyes, she had let her silent heart speak.

YOU WILL BEAR A CHILD WHO SHALL BE A LIGHT FOR ALL THE WORLD.

From where had come the words, spoken in a masculine voice? Had only she heard them? Bona, Pacifica, and Alguisa were kneeling silently, their heads bowed.

To Ortolana, that promise became a rare jewel. She had repeated it to herself during labor and then each time plague touched Umbria or Clare fell ill.

This child whose face she was stroking had been conceived in ardent love. Ortolana had stitched her baptismal gown, breastfed, bathed, and dressed her. She was teaching Clare to sew, write, read Latin, pray. Servants would not rear Ortolana's children.

Clare. The name meant "Brilliance."

YOU WILL BEAR A CHILD WHO SHALL BE A LIGHT FOR ALL THE WORLD.

In Ortolana's dream, Clare had disappeared in fire.

*Please, God, Ortolana prayed. Whatever the dream meant, don't let it mean that.*