Prologue

Eager to leave, desperate to abandon the island, young Rosário wrapped herself in her shawl and adjusted her scarf. Facing the salt spray and the unruly sea, she lowered her eyes to her soiled hands and exhaled slowly. Along the rocky shore of Santa Clara, the storm had torn loose the reed roots her mother gathered to keep the hearth alive—poor fuel, but cheaper than cryptomeria.

It had been a long time since pirates haunted the Azores, a long time since the islands had lost their woad fields and their title as the Kingdom's granary. At the waning of that long and bruised nineteenth century, the eternal trinity was still invoked—*Homeland, Crown, and Freedom*—yet people lived inwardly, sealed off from the world and from themselves. They walked the streets carrying contradictory nostalgia, a heavy *saudade*, as if trapped inside an open-air museum, as though even the wind had grown tired of moving. Elsewhere, the world had reinvented itself; here, some things endured unchanged—human fallibility, and the fickle temper of volcanoes.

Restless to depart, beneath a wheeling cloud of seagulls, Rosário scraped her knees against the rocks. The sea spray summoned memories: scaling fish, gutting and grilling them; carrying the crown in the Holy Spirit procession each year; decorating the Christmas tree

with tangerines. She knew how to balance a water jug on her head with practiced grace, yet she preferred to dance beneath the dragon tree, to pull ropes with laughing bodies, to eat Pentecostal *sopas* among the revelers. But hunger gnawed at her, demanding its daily bread, thinning her thoughts, erasing reverie. For a woman made of dreams, wakefulness itself was an affliction.

In the beginning was the ocean—before the word, long before language, before the islanders learned to name themselves. Ponta Delgada lay stretched like a languid ribbon along the southern coast, a single league of shore. Life was harsh there, every day, every minute. We women lived under the blunt rule of male arbitrariness. The most defiant refused to be shaped by the sanctimonious words of men—especially those of mediocre writers. The most lucid could not tolerate the masculine illiteracy of femininity. It is simple: they know nothing of us. They do not know that to be a woman is to carry courage and tenderness in equal measure, to touch both the magical and the tangible, to reconcile desire with justice. They do not know that to be a woman is to be the mother of the world. They cannot know—having never ceased to be pampered children, even in the arms of their wives.

Yearning for a different life, Rosário hoisted the roots—cheap firewood—beneath a sky scarred by streaks of clearing weather, trusting in a promised calm. She glanced back at her mother, standing in the doorway of their hovel, her face submerged in quiet agony. The same old distress: too little food for the week, the landlord's monthly threats.

It was time for a change.

It was time to act.

Chapter One

What a torment that heavy, somber disguise was, covering us from head to toe. And the hood—thick and rigid like a turtle shell—hides us from the eyes of the Kingdom. Life inside the Azorean cloak and hood could become an invincible duel, especially on muggy days: breath rose and mingled with sweat, blurring the boundary between body and fabric, leaving one doubtful of one's own cleanliness. It was certainly not appropriate attire for a lady on the run. God forbid.

Lifting the front of her black cloak, a frightened chicken wedged beneath her arm, Rosário ran, panting, through the busy streets of downtown Ponta Delgada. People stared at her with open disdain—men and women alike, light-skinned and dark, well-dressed or in rags. A sudden breeze pushed back her cloak, revealing copper-brown waves of hair and freckles that illuminated the beauty of her fifteen years, along with a mischievous smile betraying her defiance. On the run and gloriously eccentric, her movements exposed an unbuttoned shirt, crumpled undergarments, bare feet caked with earth—and unmistakably, the boldness of her soul. In an overbearing age, Rosário dared to be her own master.

It was a Friday morning like so many others—because life begins on Fridays. The sky hung partly clouded, the humidity pressing people into the streets. In 1873, the port city of Ponta Delgada was both the pride and the embarrassment of the Motherland, suspended between hunger and abundance. Beyond the city rose manor houses and mansions with servants, their vast properties sheltered behind tall basalt walls. At the margins, poverty clung stubbornly: muddy roads stained the hems of women's skirts, and men spat into the earth without shame. In the city center, dirt streets pulsed with streetcars, hawkers barked their wares, and outsiders lingered with curious eyes. But the island's true frenzy gathered at the City Gates—the triple arches open to the Atlantic—where progress, innovation, and dazzling novelties arrived. Along with disease.

Turning toward the Matriz church square, Rosário slowed, struggling to catch her breath. She pulled the hood forward, retreating into its cloth cave. The chicken squirmed; she tucked it closer and bent her knees, hiding her grimy heels beneath the hem. She blended seamlessly with the other hooded women drifting through the crowd and stifled a giggle, as though the entire chase amused her.

Her pursuers were close—two men with hands hardened by farm labor. The older wore suspenders and a wide-brimmed hat draped with blue cloth; the younger, shorts and a brown beret. They moved carefully, scanning faces, but the shadows beneath the hoods rendered the women anonymous, faceless, untouchable.

Rosário reveled in the commotion: merchants gossiping, carts pulled by goats, barefoot boys with streaming noses, farmers atop mules, old men puffing foul corn-leaf cigarettes, pigs darting loose, gentlemen in coats and top hats, dogs nosing into corners, carriages rattling past.

"Move, mule!"

Beyond the familiar stench of animals and their secretions drifted the smell of burning wood from fresh bread baking. A procession of elegant and grotesque figures passed, voices overlapping, tongues

clicking, perfumes colliding with rot, drab garments brushing against fabrics of impossible color. Wild beards and waxed mustaches alike paraded through the air, all seasoned with the delicate, fleeting taste of island freedom. Everyone wants to visit the island. Few are willing to live inside it.

Then—a soft crackle beneath her cloak.

Rosário froze. Her eyes widened. She stroked the hen's feathers, blaming the heat. Too late.

"Grab that thief!" shouted the man in suspenders.

Without looking back, Rosário hoisted her cloak and lunged forward, slicing through the crowd with clumsy brilliance. Cries followed—complaints, curses—because a woman running was nearly as scandalous as a woman smoking. She turned sharply and pounded on the nearest door. No answer. She struck again, harder, until it opened to reveal a man tall as an araucaria tree.

"What?"

He stood crisp and composed: white shirt pressed, trousers finely woven, shoes gleaming black. Breathless, cloak flung open, Rosário thrust the chicken into his hands with no trace of maidenly decorum.

"Take it out of the rent."

He opened his mouth—to protest, to calculate—but she was already gone, disappearing just as her pursuers rounded the corner.

She veered toward the church square, the city's pulsing heart. She passed the marble fountain before the Town Hall, the tiled butcher shops, the parish barbers along the church's southern wall where the tinsmith, the grinder, and Mr. Miranda of the leeches chatted idly. She slipped past wine barrels, ignored the corner grocer, burst through the City Gates, descended the arcade steps to the scent of salt and the groan of boats against their moorings—then climbed again toward the Customs House.

Rough hands seized her cloak.

"Where's my chicken?"

"What chicken?" Rosário snapped, struggling against his stale breath and iron grip.

The response was crude and immediate. The younger man spat full into her face.

"You and your mother are the shame of this town! You'll pay dearly for that chicken!"

With a sudden twist inside the Azorean hood, Rosário broke free. Her cloak fell away. She stood in underclothes and undershirt, shoulder strap slipping loose, her courage worn like a veil. Her freckles burned. She smoothed her hair behind her ear—as if dignity might be summoned by gesture alone—then clenched her jaw, stepped forward twice, and drove her foot into the man's groin. He collapsed, writhing on the stones like a split worm.

Customs officials and spectators surged closer, hungry for spectacle. Some cursed Rosário, others hissed at her exposed body, while many laughed at the humiliated farmers. Cigarettes flared. Bets were placed.

The man in the wide-brimmed hat lifted her discarded cloak and advanced. To him, a woman belonged wherever a man decided. Had she been his daughter, her back would have known the lash daily.

Rosário danced before him, fists raised like a boxer. She dodged and spun—an acrobat born of necessity—countering his blows as the crowd roared, applause colliding with boos. She ended with a solid punch to his nose.

Outrage.

He wiped the blood, then drew a razor. The crowd tightened, intoxicated.

Rosário avoided the blade twice, her waist bending with instinctive grace, but the pier hemmed her in. A cut burned along her arm. A blow clouded her eyes. Luck never lingered long. For women in those testicular times, fortune arrived sparingly: drops of sweat each hour, salty tears each day, blood once every moon.

She chose water.

And let herself fall.

Chapter Two

The sounds returned gradually, sharpening with each pass of the towel across the teenager's torn brow. Her caretaker's delicate hands moved in a quiet choreography, as if conducting an unseen orchestra: soaking the cloth in a clay basin, wringing out the excess of boiled water, then returning to Rosário's skin with patient tenderness. Each touch followed the last in a gentle cadence, deliberate and loving.

As her freckles regained their color, Rosário opened her eyes. She found herself in a small room enclosed by four whitewashed walls. A crucifix hung before the bed. On the dresser, atop a folded napkin, rested the silver crown of the Holy Ghost. Beside it stood a candlestick and a book—*Amor de Perdição*, by Camilo Castelo Branco. She shivered, suddenly aware of her nakedness, and pulled the sheet up to her neck.

Then she smiled, recognizing the woman before her.

"Aunt Clara… are you dressed as a nun?"

"Do you like it?" Clara straightened her habit, her graceful face brightening with amusement. "It's fresher than your potato sack, at least."

Rosário sat up and noticed her cloak and cape folded neatly over the back of a chair—clean, cared for. The wound burned faintly. She inhaled, puzzled by the unfamiliar scent of the room.

"Where are we?"

"In the Convent of Our Lady of Hope, my dear child." Clara set the cloth aside and handed her a bundle of clothing. "Here. Put these underpants on."

"*Tia*… what are you doing in a convent? I didn't know you had a calling." Rosário ran her fingers over the fabric, noting the careful seams. "Aren't you afraid of thieves?"

"Oh, holy child…" Clara sighed. "Here I don't have to count coins. I have food, clean clothes, and peace. The real question is what *you* were doing—arriving with a black eye and a twisted arm. They carried you in like that. If my sister finds out—"

"Mother knows," Rosário said quietly. "That I left."

"And does she know you stole?"

"The chicken was loose, *tia*."

Rosário buttoned her blouse and sat back down.

"Does she know you ran away? And that you struck a man?" Clara lowered her voice. "If you want to be beaten, go to Arquinha. They'll treat you well. And if you go at night, they'll tear your dress between your legs."

A dull thump sounded through the wall, followed by a muffled complaint. Clara crossed herself, murmured forgiveness, then asked:

"And your father?"

"He is not my father."

"Oh, holy child… doesn't he work?"

"He's sick," Rosário replied. "Like the landlord's orange grove."

"As you know, the orange cycle is ending. May Our Lady of the Conception save us. Tell him to try the pineapple greenhouses—they're hiring."

"*Tia*… we're leaving."

Clara froze. "Leaving? When? Where?"

"Tomorrow. To the Empire."

Silence settled heavily between them. Clara stepped closer, until she could smell her niece's familiar, earthy scent.

"Don't be foolish. It's dangerous. Doesn't your mother read the newspapers?"

"They pay well," Rosário insisted. "She'll be a housemaid on a large farm. So many return rich. And I want to travel too."

"Have you ever been to Ribeira Grande?"

"No."

"And yet you want to go to Brazil?" Clara shook her head. "You've never even left the city."

Another knock echoed from the adjoining room. Clara muttered about reckless lives and mortal sins, then reached into her pocket and produced a rosary. She pressed it into Rosário's palm with reverence—a link to the Virgin, to the Lord Holy Christ of the Miracles, the summit of island devotion.

Rosário closed her fingers around the wooden beads as if they shared her unease. Her fingertips blanched. Her voice tightened.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Clara drew her into an embrace known only to women—friend to friend, body to body. Rosário sobbed against her shoulder.

"I need a miracle, *tia*."

"You are in the right place, my love."

Clara smoothed her copper-brown hair, dried the freckles from her cheeks, and helped her into her cloak.

They moved through the quiet corridors of the Convent of Our Lady of Hope, crossed the cloister, and entered the adjoining church. At one end rose the gilded chancel, arching above the high altar. Along the nave, tile panels narrated the life of Mother Teresa Anunciada. At the opposite end stood the thick railing separating the faithful from *Ecce Homo*.

The air carried a singular perfume, the floral balm sought by pilgrims for generations. The sacred structure was crowded with flowers, forming a vivid scaffold around the wooden image of the martyred Christ: fists bound by pearls, a golden crown of thorns set

with precious stones, and a gaze of unbearable intensity. As Rosário approached, her blood warmed, incense brushing her nostrils. She studied the scourged torso beneath the jeweled cloak, the reliquary at the chest said to guard a fragment of the True Cross. In Christ's hand, the golden scepter burned like a torch; on his head, the splendor—the most prized treasure—radiated its layered mystery.

But what warmed Rosário's soul was not the gold, nor the silver, nor the cost of jewels. It was the language of color, the brushstrokes saturating every petal with belief; the mingled pollen nourishing faith in something larger than injustice. And above all, it was the gaze—the exposed anguish of one who carried the weight of sinners.

"Today, my Friend seems sadder, *tia*," Rosário said softly. "Don't you think?"

"Ask for your miracle," Clara replied.

Rosário closed her eyes. Darkness came. The pier returned in flashes: laughter, the blow, the fall into the sea. Then her mother—crying, tending a sick man, enduring his fists, cleaning houses, receiving men, collecting coins. When the images loosened their grip, she leaned on her aunt, trembling, and extended her arm. Her fingertips brushed the velvet of the Lord's cloak.

The weight lifted.

They parted at the church door—Clara offering kisses and counsel, Rosário gently resisting both. She crossed Campo de São Francisco, the broad square leading home. As she passed the trees and benches, while her aunt still waved behind her, Rosário checked the book hidden beneath her cloak.

Amor de Perdição.

She smiled.

No one had noticed.