

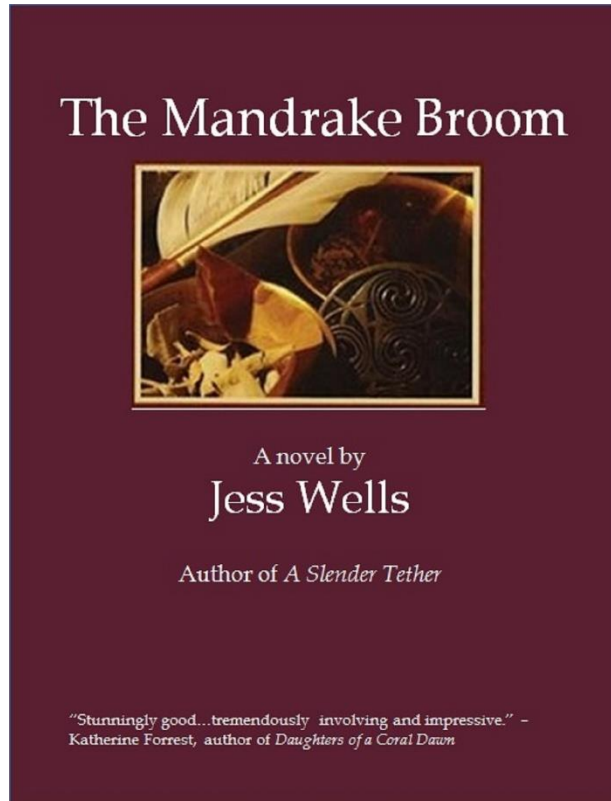
The Mandrake Broom

A novel by Jess Wells

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Book One

Chapter One

Salerno, Italy, 1465

The priests encircled the little girl, pressing her against the wall with the end of a cane. Like a chip of flint, a shard of a girl, she seemed as much of the stone wall as in front of it and she willed herself to seep through the mortar. To escape the priests screaming questions and predictions of the Devil's presence in her, to run from their flapping black robes, their twisted faces with spittle on their beards and their eyes promising tortures that she had heard about. They couldn't burn her as a witch, Luccia thought, she was too young. But only too young by six months. She was nine. They could. They would. They would say that the Devil had sent her here with this big box in her arms, its lid flapping open and a vial broken on the cobblestones. Obstetric tools had clanged to the ground and lay across her tattered shoes. Soul snatcher, she heard them hiss. Stealer of body parts. The rack, the blades, they would strip a yard of her flesh for every soul she had taken.

Bells began tolling in the high tower and the great doors of the church creaked open. The priests turned in unison and Luccia ducked, ran along the wall, turned the corner

and dove under the cape of a pie man, trotted sideways in the lane hearing the priests calling behind her. She folded herself into the twig bundles of an old man, darted out to be the swineherd, rolled under the wheels of a wagon, curled in the gutter as a bundle of rags. She tore her leg on the cobblestones, but saw that the priests were turning, befuddled. She sprinted up and grabbed a dirty cloth, became a tottering, cloaked old man, then pushed the rag into her pocket and joined a gaggle of children. Within three blocks and down two narrow lanes she had become both genders, three ages, two professions and an inanimate object. Anything but be seen. Stealth, subterfuge: she would make her body as malleable as bread dough.

As a girl, Luccia Alimenti heard the hem of her mother's skirt slap across the flagstones of the piazza as the sound of curtains being drawn to protect her from the dawn, of a sheet pulled over her young, sweat-chilled skin, of tea on a little plate being brought to her across the night-time room. It was the single note of sudden inspiration as her mother was driven from their rooms to the medical school across the square, and the sound of her mother's skirt was in harmony with the rustle of her students as they debated the merits of burdock root as a poultice.

This morning, with a lemony sun on her shoulders and her own skirts too short to make a sound, Luccia hurried to cross the piazza after her mother and the glory of her noisy skirts. Her mother, Giovanna, strode ahead to catch up with a wild-haired Irish woman, Fiona, who let her walking stick thud insistently on the stones and her cape flare out, displaying its deep blue lining. The women met without speaking, and Giovanna studied Fiona's eyes for some good news, but sighed over the anger she saw instead. Fiona put her walking stick under her arm and tried to collect her hair and her rage into its knot.

Fiona had a new gash on her arm and Giovanna reached for it, letting herbs in a flat basket she was carrying slipped unnoticed onto the flagstones. Luccia gathered them as she approached — chamomile, St. John's Wort and tansy — clasp them like a bouquet in her fist, feeling their oils dampening her hand, their aroma filling her nostrils, and she crushed all but the tansy between her fingers, rubbed the heads of their flowers together until they coalesced into a gel that shone in the citrus sun. Luccia, nine years old and lanky for her age, threw her shoulders back and smeared the salve on Fiona's arm. The women, studying each other's faces in a silent conversation of disappointment, turned to Luccia, surprised. Her mother opened the girl's fist, inspected the basket, the stems that lay abandoned at her feet.

"How'd she know?" Fiona asked incredulously.

"More to the point, how did it gel without boiling?" Giovanna asked quietly.

Giovanna brightened with pride, standing tall behind her daughter and putting her hands on the girl's shoulders, but Fiona looked stealthily around them, then turned the clan by their shoulders and marched them quickly out of the square, leaving the scraps of the herbs on the cobblestones. As a priest crossed their path, Giovanna and Fiona averted their eyes and Luccia was gathered deeper into the folds of her mother's melodic skirt.

Luccia clung to her mother's hand and its messages but stomped across the square with irritation. Neither Fiona, nor even her mother, understood: they thought plants were just objects at the beck and call of the healer, but Luccia knew it was the other way around. Plants had will. They communicated. They didn't just grow together in each other's shadow by mistake, they chose each other to build community, they spoke on the wind, the breeze. They signaled their compatibility through color and smell. The plants in her mother's basket had made it clear that they belonged together. They had cast out the tansy. She knew. Not because she had heard Fiona's discomfort from across the square. Even when she was inches away from Fiona's arm with the salve in the palm of her hand, she didn't hear the pain of the torn skin. She heard the plants working together toward the salve. She had heard the cry of the rejected tansy, just as now that they were nearing their home, she heard the contented murmur of the moss growing thick on the fountain.

Fiona shut the door to their building as if they'd reached shore. After making a brief sign of the cross, Giovanna pleaded silently with the portraits of her family that hung down the hall of their flat — serious people in academic robes or the aprons of alchemists, holding mortars or herb sprays. Giovanna Alimenti was one of the few female medical professors at the University of Salerno, the last in a line of Alimenti doctors for whom babies had been named and cures had been dedicated, whose discoveries peppered the curricula. Now their paintings were hung with an attempt at ceremony and decorum, in a flat off a square they wouldn't have approved of, in a hallway much too short for the stretch of their grand history.

Fiona strode into the living room, tossing her walking stick to the floor where it hit with a violent thud, and Giovanna rustled in behind her.

"So they said no," Giovanna said quietly.

"Eve's sin," Fiona snarled, and Giovanna sighed, shook her head.

"We're down to just two copies," Giovanna said, pacing the room while Luccia pressed her back against the hallway wall, listening. Fiona threw open her hands in furious resignation.

That morning, Fiona had climbed to the abbey on the hill above town to plead once again with the monks to copy the works of Salerno's only woman master, Dame Trotula, who had held the master's chair in medicine at the university until her death in 1097 AD. More important than Dame Bofana who brought mid-winter gifts, more cherished than anyone with a portrait in the hall, Trotula's name was invoked in the Alimenti household as if she were a dragon-slayer in a fairy tale. Giovanna told her daughter of Trotula as they baked, as they studied together. Trotula was perhaps the first to understand that there were three types of diseases, Giovanna explained, ticking them off on her floury fingers: inherited, contagious and self-generated. But Trotula wrote about women's bodies as well as men's, Giovanna said, pounding the dough with her fist. She documented childbirth and its diseases, gynecology and its intricacies. Trotula was the first to teach pediatrics as a separate branch of medicine. She had infuriated the medical world when she had suggested that the man was as easily at fault for sterility as the woman.

Fiona angrily muttered in the living room and Luccia hid within earshot: now there weren't enough copies of Trotula's work for the students, or the library, and they were receiving requests from other schools. The transcription of books was in the hands of just two groups, one of whom was the monks, who had recently taken to frightened refusal: it was against the monk's orders to write of female genitalia and of the ways to ease childbirth. Eve's sin, the monk who was head of the scribes had whispered fiercely, though it was his own fear of persecution that drove him. They wouldn't write on it, and the herbs to regulate menstruation and childbirth were outlawed. So Fiona had stridden home furious, frustrated.

Luccia sat in the middle of the hall, her lanky legs tucked under her, staring at the portraits while eating a blood orange, the juice running down her chin, then her arm, to her sleeve. She licked at the juice nervously, troubled by the conversation and the sound of her mother's skirts as she paced the room. She searched the faces of her ancestors for an answer to her mother's dilemma, for a sign of herself, and as she did more frequently than she told her mother, for a sign of her father.

Luccia had been told perfunctorily that her father had died on the horns of an ox before she was born, that he had been a fine potter who had lived here on the square, but Luccia understood early on that he was not a man for whom portraits were painted. Luccia didn't remember meeting her father nor any of the doctors honored on the wall. All that Luccia remembered of her family was the smell of lavender mixed with the wood of her aunt's funeral pyre, and the heaving of Giovanna's breasts.

Luccia sighed, and Giovanna turned to her, watching her scan the faces of her relatives again. Her daughter's search added to the abandoned feeling that hung through the flat. Usually, Giovanna, despite missing her people, treated her pain as unimportant. She and her daughter were Salernitas, she reminded herself, devoted to the town's cherished medical college. Unspoken and powerful for Salernitas was the knowledge that for most women, their pasts were something they were in flight from, a secret that made them feel unmoored at dusk. The medical school at Salerno was filled with women who had come from all over Europe and North Africa, cast out by their families, unsuccessful in their marriages, in contract with someone to avoid a worse contract with someone else. Muslims wouldn't let men provide medical attention to their wives, so they educated women to be doctors in Salerno. Jews weren't allowed in universities anywhere else so Jewish women studied there. Christians wouldn't educate their women on any subject at all outside of the convent, so Salerno became the one place where a woman could congregate and study, could move through a city with a book in her arm without raising suspicion. So generations of women medical students became world-renowned doctors to kings, founders of hospitals, authors that schooled generations. There was a tenuous safety for them in Salerno, where women took each other at face value, in the present, no questions asked. So Luccia took her mother's word for it that her father had died on the horns of an ox and trusted her nose that her last relative had smelled of lavender and wood.

Salerno, just south of Naples, was perched between the Mediterranean and the crags of the Amalfi mountains. While up the coast, artisans fired kilns and made ceramics for the queen, the Salernitas sent up tiny curls of smoke from the fires of herbalists and received the stricken king, cured the maladies of Popes, diagnosed aristocrats who traveled far to find them, and healed the poor lucky enough to be in Salerno.

Luccia and her mother lived for a thin sinew of rosemary smoke, the aroma of hawthorn in the sun, the thick warm smell of marigolds being boiled for ointment. They were fleeting smells that caught Luccia as she walked around a corner, a thread of smoke that escaped out a window and quickly disappeared, experiments that wafted through a doorway as a woman slipped out with the smoke clinging to her skirts. Next to shops filled with ropes and pulleys, buckets and nets for the ships, were windows filled with herbs drying upside down in little bouquets — Irish moss, witch hazel, stinging nettle, valerian, pellitory of the wall, comfrey, angelica, chervil. Barks were piled on the shelves, roots sent her their odor of rich dirt, twigs held their last clinging leaves, and — sitting in baskets prepared by the shopkeeper — hop pillows and vinegars for the bath. Bottles of blue liquid shimmered in front of her, and inside glass jars pickled animals showed their protruding teeth and their claws. Buckets of fetid smelling ooze made her hide her nose inside her sleeve while she studied the bird's nests and pickled eggs, vines that looked like nightmare spiders, the drying ears of unknown animals, little vials with tiny corks wrapped in tissue paper scratched with unknown languages. She was a little girl in a town of big smells, using her nose to navigate, too young to see the countertop but listening to the scraping sound of the mortar and pestle, the hiss of powders being poured into little linen bags.

Herbs and the ocean, they defined Luccia's Salerno, and as she walked with her hand safe within her mother's, comforted by the rustle of Giovanna's skirts, Luccia's mother recited the names of the plants they passed, each cluster in the window, each aroma that found them.

The herbs became street markers to Luccia, since one narrow, twisting street housed the school for studies of the skin and the marigold and garlic to treat it. Winding away from the piazza in the lane behind the church was the avenue of the scholars of the bone smelling of comfrey and eggshells. The alley that held the butcher shop gave off an iron stench of blood, rosemary and dill.

Salerno was also a town filled with manuscripts — the texts of the great masters, of course, the *Passionario* — all 251 chapters of it — the *Antidotarium* as their pharmaceutical text. The Arabs brought their books of alchemy, their scrolls, and their spices. Books on the healing arts in many languages lay next to the stacks of bark, wedged between the bottles and the charts of the moon, the tides, the sunrise. In Salerno everyone carried notes: journals in boxes, disheveled studies with scribbles in the margin, extra papers stuck in a book, manuscripts carried through town like a suckling child. In Salerno, every vegetable basket had a folio stuck in the corner, every stack of washing had its study notes underneath. Papers jutted from pockets, from clammy, anxious fists, from bags, under capes.

They were a people who fervently believed in the power of a new idea, the remedy just invented, in collecting and comparing how it was done elsewhere. The scrap of paper and its cryptic note had more power in Salerno than the leather-bound volume, for the scrap was the hint of something new, and Salerno was a city in love with possibility, enamored of the shred of evidence, of chasing a thread toward discovery.

Giovanna Alimenti chased that thread, studying the medical texts of scholars from around the known world and the masters from the university. Master Ferrario taught the Salernitas to cure fevers. Engido taught them 20 types of urine color and the diseases they indicated. They learned to read the pulse, the color and feel of the skin. They could read the health of the body from the colors of the eye, they could differentiate between malaria and typhoid, to calculate the height of the fever and the date of the recovery. Salernitas practiced surgery and da Parma documented its procedures, while Master Grafeo in the 1300s wrote on ocular surgery for cataracts. In Salerno, Luccia's mother proudly stated as she and her daughter wended their way through the streets, medicine was advanced, and the body revered.

Facing Fiona in their apartment, Giovanna placed her hands on the table and tried to change the subject, to diffuse the tension. "I've uncovered a new anesthetic," Giovanna offered. "In the *Antidotarium*. Opium henbane."

"Henbane?" Fiona asked.

"Combined with mandragora, hemlock, blackberry, lettuce and ivy," Giovanna continued. "I was astounded to read it."

"With mandragora? Mandrake?" Fiona repeated.

"From Palestine. To wake them up again," Giovanna said, "fennel juice poured down their nostrils."

Luccia, clutching the remnants of her orange, shuddered at the remembered smell of fennel. There was an additional secret in Salerno — conversations on painkillers and drugs for childbirth, more mysterious than all the scrolls and the notes in the city, Luccia thought. It was a whispered pharmacopeia shared among the women students and doctors.

This new remedy, startling and hopeful though it was, just exacerbated Fiona's anger. The women spoke the remedies but never wrote them, which made the information fragile and nearly impossible to disseminate, she grumbled to herself. With the work of Trotula threatened with obscurity, how many women would die in childbirth for lack of simple remedies that had been known for years?

The lemony day turned into a sultry evening, and after a bowl of broth, Giovanna and Fiona opened their doors to women students for conversation and study. The young women lay in their slips behind a tall fence of vines on Giovanna's balcony, listening to the splash of the fountain in the piazza and the hurried cllop of donkeys crossing below. Luccia inhaled the smell of fresh anchovies grilling in the trattoria while Giovanna instructed her students.

As they spoke, Luccia could smell the barley remedy her mother described, remembered where it had been on the walks with her mother. She closed her eyes and let the visions of the leaves and the aromas wash over her.

The latest news was discussed that night by candlelight, the shadows of the little flames dancing across the women's faces like premonition, like doubt. Luccia twirled her thick black hair around her finger, inhaling the smell of lavender soap, the garlic of someone's lunch, the reassuring scent of her mother. Luccia curled onto a cotton rug staring at a map of Europe pinned to the wall just inside the balcony doors, and at a portrait of an old relative in a smock, while her mother flopped into a high-back chair, her books and papers spilling around her. She jotted notes to herself that had nothing to do with the discussion.

Despite the fact that it was hot, that dinner was over, and they had been home for hours, Fiona O'Connor paced the floor still in her cape, half-listening, half-wrestling with the question of Trotula. Running her hand over her head, her sleeve button got caught in her hair and pulled the knot of it down around her shoulders, her long red hair brighter than flames. She had plain, indistinguishable dresses, but always wore a heavy pewter broach emblazoned with a Celtic knot that Luccia traced with her eyes. Fiona threw her cape back off her shoulders, as if she would jump out of her skin, the broach at the base of her neck.

"It's getting worse," she mumbled. "Much worse."

Luccia stared at the broach's outline to avoid Fiona's anger, and heard snatches of the student's responses. Another university closing their doors to women and Jews. "Salerno is nearly the only medical college left for women. Jobs denied even the best of them. This witch thing, an outrage.

Giovanna calmly turned the pages of a manuscript. "In this room, women are doctors. Surely it won't visit itself on us."

"A couple of shrews with angry husbands," one of the students laughed nervously as she circled the room offering lemon tea. "That's who gets caught in this witch thing."

Fiona whirled abruptly, waved the arguments away. "What about the mass burnings of midwives in Heidelberg and Cologne? What about Spain, in the Alpine regions? Have you forgotten those already?" she shouted back at Giovanna, fumbling in an interior pocket for a pouch. Fiona grabbed a pinch of it and stuck it between her lip and cheek, producing a stench on her breath that Luccia could hardly bear.

"There's still hope, Fiona," Giovanna said, raising her cup. "Several of the Queens of Europe have opened hospitals, have trained nurses by the hundreds. Scores of women students from Salerno are finding work there."

"To work beside the new doctors," a student sneered, "who've been taught that scorpions are born by rubbing basil between two stones."

"Exactly the reason this time will pass, and these fools will fail," said Giovanna softly. "Not to put it crudely but no people that stupid could triumph."

"Oh, not so," Fiona warned. "Can you imagine that they only teach now about the knife and bloodletting?"

"Well, we practice surgery as well," Giovanna said.

"But not surgery alone. Any peasant can walk into the forest and pick the herb to heal herself, but not if all she knows about is surgery. And these new so-called doctors, they refuse to attend to anything related to women's health. Anything at all. Even the teaching of the great Trotula will not be immune," Fiona shouted.

"In the dungeons I hear they use..."

"Not in front of the child," Giovanna snapped, turning to regard her daughter, then bending again over her papers to close the argument. It was a gesture Luccia most associated with her mother — whenever she worked, Giovanna's head would suddenly turn and she recognized that Luccia was there, as if encountering a species of animal that she knew she should know but couldn't quite place.

Fiona, pacing the room, turned to Luccia and her heart contracted. When she had moved in with the Alimenti family, Luccia was no bigger than an eggplant, and Fiona had tended her like a mother and watched her grow. Fiona's steely eyes looked at the girl, trying to find a safe path in medicine that could protect her. Fiona dug into a cloth bag for a brush, crossed the room, and knelt behind the girl, pulling Luccia into her lap. She struggled to get the brush through Luccia's hair while the girl leaned back against Fiona's torso. Fiona's glowing blue cape surrounded them like their own private world, but Luccia turned her head against the putrid smell of Fiona's chewing herbs.

"What made this blue?" Luccia asked her, beginning a private riddle between them.

"Woad," Fiona said with a smile as she had dozens of times before, her hands fighting to pull the brush through Luccia's hair.

"I think they used bilberry fruits as well," Luccia said, pulling the cape around her.

"Oh you do, do you? Giovanna, this child's hair!" Fiona admonished, and Giovanna sighed, exasperated, exchanging worried glances with Fiona, then jotting notes again. Fiona turned back to the girl.

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