



# Kira Jane Buxton

Author of Thurber Prize Finalist *Hollow Kingdom*

# Tartufo

A Novel

"I savored every page of this book."

—SHELBY VAN PELT





# Tartufo



**Kira Jane Buxton**



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*Per la mia famiglia—Em, Pops, and Rinny*

And to the treasure of a Tuscan village where we  
planted seeds and grew roots

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*A ogni uccello il suo nido e bello.*  
*To every bird, his nest is beautiful.*

—Italian proverb

## The Visitor

**T**he wisest souls say that pure mountain air makes us all go a little mad. A wind—lawless and long tailed—slices through the snow-stippled Apuan Alps and the Apennines with all the wantonness of La Befana, the winter witch. Swifts catch this wind on their wings, carving up the crisp blue morning. Dipping down into the valley, the wind now worries over the murmuring blue tongue of the Serchio river on its journey to the Tyrrhenian Sea. It slips—an unseen spirit—under the Devil’s Bridge. Shivers along the great gray hunch of the Devil’s back. Hissing over every ancient stone. Rising from the river, the wind picks up speed, hastening toward the woods. Hurling toward chestnut trees spaced like the pews of a great duomo. The wind now weaves between golden leaves. Whispering quick consonants between the branches, borrowing an autumnal aura. Sweet sighs of ripe chestnuts and shed leaves. And here—where the wind steals woodland scents—hides a curiosity. Cloistered by soil, moss, stone, and leaf litter, a thing unseen—a thing quite mysterious—lies in waiting.

A thing that sits buried, like old bones.

What lies under the soil has stayed secret. It is an underground barterer. A schemer who has set a trap in the soil. A sylvan swindler. A tormentor.

A tiny god.

Swelling to irresistible bulk, it has ripened into a knobbed fruit of corruption. And now the time has come. The tiny god releases a lusty sigh, soundlessly unfurling a phantom into the wind.

No more visible than the notes of nightingale song.

No more audible than a wordless wish.

The tiny god has released a cipher.

The breath of the tiny god is whisked away by the breeze, slipping through the damp woodland of chestnut worship. Deeper into the woods, the breath in the breeze paints the pupils of a fallow deer into great glistening lakes. Fur stiffens along a back freckled with the white of first snow. The doe salivates in answer to the call of the stranger she can smell but cannot see. Her nostrils flutter, messages flood her bloodstream. But the breath blows on.

Now a wild sow lifts her moist snout from the leaf litter and inhales a slip of the wind. Instantly intoxicated, her muddy snout snuffing. The grunting sow is aroused into a frenzy. Bristled legs stab at the soil as she arranges them to assume her stance, ready to receive the boar she smells. Turning her head toward her tail, she hunts for him, but—and here is the trick, here is the olfactory deception—there is no boar, and the breeze blows on through the woods, fanning the sensual scent along with it.

See-through scarves of scent curl from the forest and swirl toward a beautiful medieval village, perched upon a peak. Its tallest point an eleventh-century bell tower with memories of steel swords and shields. The wind, pickled with flavors of the forest, ridden by the breath of the tiny god, tickles trees of olive and cypress. Until it dangles its string of little calamities above cobblestone streets and terra-cotta roof tiles.

And it settles upon the medieval village like a spell.

Down in the village, past the sleepy post office, past the boarded-up *ristorante* and the sixteenth-century church and the water fountain. Past the teeny-tiny grocers and a ginger tomcat slinking under an archway to go make mayhem, Nonna Amara shuffles slippers over cobblestone on her morning walk. The breeze and the mysterious thing it carries slip under her shawl, bright and invigorating, a sonnet read to her skin. Nonna Amara tightens her floral shawl, the silver cirrus of her hair aflutter. She lifts the lovely lines of her face to the sky. Squeezes her eyes shut. As she inhales, a memory whirls her off her feet, whisking her all the way back to her childhood.

She is sitting at the table in the *cucina rustica* of her beloved home. Blue snakes of smoke coil around young Amara, up toward the wooden ceiling beams. Some hang themselves in her hair. Her papa, Babbo, leans in, his spice of sweet smoke, the powdered sugar lingering like a second skin, his hands thick from pummeling pastry. Babbo with his feral hair and his hands and his hairy chest and his heart, oh, his heart...

“Close your eyes, sweetheart.” That voice. The rumble, the rasp.

Amara closes her eyes, makes a wish for a thing with wheels. Her papa leans close, smelling of a glossy white soap cake, sweet tobacco from his pipe. Babbo’s pipe. Babbo’s hands wrap around the waist of her summer dress and she lifts into the air with a shriek. Babbo and Amara are a two-headed creature that blunders blindly out of the *cucina*, through the arched doorway.

“Open!” bellows Babbo. And Amara opens her eyes to a courtyard stippled with sun. The planters popping with red geraniums. Babbo’s potted herbs and their aromatic whispers of lavender and rosemary. The old black-and-white cat staring at them from a stone wall with blatant disgust in its green-eyed glare. And a bicycle, glossy and red, with a wished-for basket in the front and a seat on the back. Amara kicks her legs and screams in delight, slipping from Babbo’s shoulders, held by those hands, held by that big, rumbling laugh, until she is running toward the bike, the sun, toward Babbo running beside her yelling, “That’s it, pedal! Keep going, *piccolina*, keep going!” toward Babbo holding Amara’s delicate hand so she does not fall, toward scraped knees, toward firsts and falls, heartbreaks and hurdles, all the way through time toward Amara holding Babbo’s delicate hand so he does not fall.

The breeze blows on and Nonna Amara opens her eyes. She smiles, lifting the lines she has earned with years of laughter.

“Babbo.”

She rubs her hands together and shuffles ahead, averting her eyes from the crudely nailed planks of wood boarding up the *pasticceria*. From cobwebs on windows. She smiles, lets in birdsong instead of sorrow.



The breeze and the breath of the tiny god, ahead of Nonna Amara now, make a mad dash down a winding cobblestone street, across a sleepy piazza, and finally—with a devious bluster—slip under the door of Bar Celebrità.

The breath of the tiny god is now, to many a nose, undetectable. Indeed, all the current inhabitants of Bar Celebrità have missed the secret cipher slithering into their midst.

All but one.

At a table by the window, nestled up to the muddied boot of her person, sits Aria, a dog-shaped burst of brown and white corkscrew curls, woolen and wiry to the touch. She peers up at Giovanni's flatcap and thick white mustache with alert, almost-human hazel eyes. Giovanni Scarpazza gives his dog a reassuring nod—*Not long now*, it says—inducing a doggy yawn of excitement. Quick pink flash of a tongue.

Aria lifts her nose to the height of the table. She reads the room in sentences of scent. First, she takes in Giovanni's breakfast *bombolone*, fried dough bulging with Nutella. The pastry sits on a napkin next to a cup of strong coffee. She sniffs the spiced soil of those coffee grounds—bitter beans with a roasted raisin lilt that lifts the spirits of the humans in here. Aria smells a mist of milk as Giuseppina—*carnevale* incarnate and incidental human—manhandles the steam wand, yelling loud enough that all the hunting dogs of the village can hear. Aria leaves Giovanni's side briefly to visit the neighboring table and sniff the pant leg of Leon Rosetti. A musky reek from billy goats clings to Leon's jacket and jeans. A small map made by the urine of a young female goat dried to his boots. The farmer's skin smells of beetles and unearthed roots. He is in good health, though filled with a sadness that smells like the resin of a sick tree. Sadness the color of crushed irises. Aria reads that Leon did not sleep well last night, smells the story of his tending to an old donkey, feeding the dogs and geese breakfast after splashing his face with freezing spring water. She reads that farmer Leon woke up alone, since Aria can no longer smell the creamy vanilla flowers of fragrance that bloom in the wake of the farmer's wife.

“Good morning, Aria. Beautiful dog,” says the farmer. His breath glitters

with sweet stars of grappa. Thick farmer fingers tousle Aria's head curls. Fingers stained purple from harvesting grapes, a metallic tang of goat bells trailing from them. Aria pushes her head into Leon's hand to comfort him. She knows she is very good at comforting those who need her. And she always knows who needs comforting.

Curls bouncing, Aria pads back to the table by the window, where Giovanni is biting into the *bombolone*. Nutella oozes out, plopping onto the napkin. Aria licks her lips, then sweeps her snout under the table and across the terra-cotta tile. She sniffs a crumpled napkin with an angry smear of *arrabbiata* sauce. The spot where some tangy salt-and-vinegar crisp crumbs were swept up. Peach juice poured by a colicky child. Her nose hovers just above a dried patch of cleaning agent, chemical and sharp. And a tidy trail of dried blood droplets—human in origin, spilled by a male filled with pungent rage. Things the cleaning agent did not catch. Out of sight, in the *cucina* behind Giuseppina and the bar, Aria smells bones bubbling in a pot to make a rich broth. Stale bread tensing on a counter. Mold violating a hunk of mozzarella. The ghost of roasted garlic. The last tomatoes of summer simmer in an earthenware pot with a green potpourri of freshly chopped herbs. On the *cucina* tiles, scents tracked in on the soles of shoes—cigarette butt with a sweet stamp of lipstick, gum spat hastily onto the marble church floor, a squashed scorpion. Aria smells the stacked crates of belching onions. The metallic menace of the shotgun hidden in a cupboard under the antique stone sink. A bowl of jellied cat food, partially licked by the mischievous ginger tom who was already full from hunting mice all night but just didn't want any other cat to enjoy it.

When Aria fixes her muzzle on the table in front of her once more, just as Giovanni is swallowing the last lump of *bombolone*, a strange summoning from the forest holds her nose hostage. Aria's eyes light up with longing. She gives a gummy, open-mouthed grin, her curls quaking. Her tail takes on a life of its own, thumping terra-cotta.

The breath of the tiny god is here.

An earthy burp, a miasma of cheese and funky sweat. A sweet fizz of

fermented fruit. A message. This breath of new life sets her heart racing. A rush of passion strong as gunpowder. She whines, panting, placing her front paws onto Giovanni's leg. She lifts to her hind legs to stare into gentle gray eyes.

"Calm, Aria. Wait." Giovanni winces at the acerbity of his coffee. He pats Aria, feeling waves of vim floating from his canine companion.

Aria cocks her head at the window. She stares beyond the piazza at the arched outline of the Apennines. She will be very good and she will wait, as Giovanni has asked. Though they cannot and must not wait too long. Soon, she will follow her nose to show Giovanni what is out there. The cipher that is summoning her. Calling for her in chemicals. A tease. A treasure.

A story sent to her on the wings of the wind.

Struggling to keep her wiggly bottom on the ground, she stares out the window, pining. Possessed.

She will find the tiny god. She will do it before anyone else has a chance.

And it will change everything.

## Chapter 1

Since the *ristorante*, the best café, and the *pasticceria* shuttered their doors, Bar Celebrità has become the heart of Lazzarini Boscarino. A heart whose pulse could perhaps use one of the potent espressos made by its bartender, Giuseppina. *Bar Celebrità*—a bold name for a place that has never actually hosted a celebrity. It sits tucked behind a lonely piazza where umbrellas sing longingly of gelato in loud colors. Daffodil-yellow chairs ring rickety tables. The bar itself is nestled inside a rustic limestone building. Emerald-green shutters and potted planters. Charming vintage doors. Plaster flaking like good pastry. A bar whose stone walls glitter under the sun. Whose quaint lanterns cast it in a golden glow under the stars.

On this autumn morning, the piazza is empty but for one being. A cat—best described as a cross between a crumpled tuxedo and a well-used toilet wand—sits vigilant. Seven unplanned litters of kittens have tested her patience and her personality, so that she has matured into the kind of cat that will take a crap on the carpet before she takes crap from anyone else. The kind of cat who knows where the sensitive skin of an ankle is and how it can fell a full-grown man. The kind of cat who instills bewilderment into the heart of a mastiff. The kind of cat who is sitting next to a wine barrel holding a WELCOME! sign outside the last bar of a doomed medieval village. Ready to unleash hell upon any tourist who dares to smuggle an exposed ankle in through its door. For what is a tourist, truly, but an invader with blinding white crew socks and a selfie stick?

The cat chooses to sit out on the piazza alone to steal a moment of morning peace. And to avoid an aroma that is dogging Bar Celebrità. The smell of longing is sharper than the long-gone lemons of summer. A horrible yearning hangs in this bar. That and Giuseppina's perfume, which could

deflea even the most verminous of felines. So the cat sits outside and sniffs at maddeningly fresh mountain air.

And she realizes something is coming.

Something snarky. Sensual. A gambit.

A quiet riot.

The cat purrs in anticipation of anarchy.

It is well on its way.

Inside, Bar Celebrità is filled with the music of chiming cups and the beautiful burble of *la bella lingua*. On one side of the bar sit colorful shelves of Nutella, Baci chocolate, gum and Mentos, brightly colored jelly candies flavored limoncello, fruits of the forest, and CBD. On the other is a fridge filled with juices and soda. A freezer filled with long-forgotten gelato.

Giuseppina leans on the bar itself, her bosom spilling over its surface like two jellyfish in a battle for hegemony. She idly molests the bar's wooden surface with a rag, sighing loud enough to suggest some sort of respiratory distress. Dusty bottles line shelves against the stone wall behind her, as well as a large mirror and framed photographs of various celebrities. Postcards from Milan, Florence, Rome. Big cities, where big things are happening. And, most prominently, a tacked-on flyer inviting one and all to join in the twenty-second birthday party and celebrations for Maurizio, who happens to be a donkey.

At the end of the bar, scowling over a cup of rocket fuel, is Duccio Berardinelli, somber and sporting a thin silver ponytail. He is a wet weekend of a man and the village's disgraced postman. Some say Duccio has not smiled in seventy years, but most certainly not after his scandal.

"Giuseppina, where is my coffee?" pleads Padre Francesco, who has been languishing on a barstool in front of Giuseppina, watching her not make the coffee he ordered twenty minutes ago.

"I'll get to it; I am very busy."

Padre Francesco is a plump man of God, blessed with biblical black eyebrows like two Pekingese guarding the temples of his bald head. He looks around the bar in bafflement. The current patrons of Bar Celebrità—hunter

Giovanni with his dog at the table by the window; Duccio, the ex-postman, brooding at the end of the bar; Leon, the forlorn farmer—are all grimacing as they sip potent coffee. Giuseppina flaps dismissively at Padre with arms so tanned she could camouflage against the coffee grounds with which she has carpeted Bar Celebrità. This particular tan was born at the Versilia seaside at the end of summer, where she faced the ocean eating a bowl of *cacciucco*—tangy tomato-and-white-wine stew with mussels, cuttlefish, squid, and prawns the size of puppies. Seafood as sweet as the sea. Between sips of a velvet Chianti, she savored the salt breeze stinging her lips, a kiss of coconut from someone’s sunbaked skin. She abandoned her clothes, running toward waves. A skinny dip in a cerulean sea. After bobbing in Tyrrhenian salt water, she took a lengthy nap on the sand, breasts sunny-side up, thighs and buttocks achieving the reddish searing every chef worth his salt wants for a *bistecca alla Fiorentina*.

Giuseppina turns to the mirror, jostling the warring jellyfish in her beige bra. She is wearing a floral singlet and a plethora of emotions where a sleeve would be if she was not wearing a singlet.

“I could be famous, Padre,” she states. Sure, Giuseppina has had a healthy serving of hardships, but she is not one to wallow in the wet sands of nostalgia. As a young woman, she was self-conscious of her curves, of every eye tracing her silhouette. At fifty-three, she couldn’t give a flying fig about what any eye is up to. She has honed her keen nose for nonsense. Let them feast upon every fabulous feature.

She manages Bar Celebrità. Took over for owner Lorenzo as he and his beloved wife traveled all over Italy for her career in veterinary medicine. And now he has returned under the saddest of circumstances. Giuseppina stepped in because she loves this village. She grew up here. Met a Boscarini man and married him at the little church. Had her daughter, Elisabetta, and raised her in this beautiful medieval village where a sunset turns the stone walls pink. Where a labyrinth of lovely cobblestone streets are patrolled by old-age pensioners and an inordinate number of cats.

Giuseppina inhales the ambrosia of life, sweet as all the seafood in a