



THE

AMALFI CURSE

a novel

SARAH
PENNER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE LOST APOTHECARY

BookTok is raving about *The Amalfi Curse*!

“Pure genius! Penner takes magical realism to a whole new depth, leagues under the sea. Sarah’s words are a breathtaking treasure that will captivate the imagination of readers and pull their heartstrings.”

—Alanna Grace @alannagraceauthor

“[*The Amalfi Curse* is] written beautifully and will have you turning pages until the end. The author’s words are magnificent and will have you captivated.”

—Red @redbookreview

“It’s authors like Sarah who are able to mix history, adventure and a sprinkle of love that make historical fiction and the stories come to life.”

—Becky @beckybingbooks

“Sarah Penner uses love, sunken treasure, heartbreak, and magic to seamlessly weave together past and present in two compelling and emotional stories. This was a beautiful story, and perfect for anyone who likes to read stories of powerful women.”

—Amanda @amandamegreeds

“Sarah Penner has done it again. Mystery, history, and magic. Classically beautiful writing, devastatingly compelling characters, and seamlessly intertwined timelines. This book is a treasure!”

—Erin K. Larson-Burnett @e.k.b.books

“100% this is my new favorite book of Sarah Penner’s. Whether you’re a fan of mystery, romance, and historical fiction, I think this is a book that stretches across multiple genres and so many readers will fall in love with it.”

—Martina Barrow @martinas_library

“Magical realism, sunken treasure, dual time lines, in an epic setting on the Italian coast mixed with mystery, love and adventure... Sarah Penner has outdone herself in *The Amalfi Curse!*”

—Mindi D’Elia @readtraveleatandrepeat

“A mysteriously magical story about the power of love, told through writing that’s as enchanting as the Positano landscape in which it is set. This is Sarah Penner at her absolute best.”

—Shannon Demaio @bookish_boy.mom

“Penner immerses you in an addictive and enthralling voyage along the Amalfi Coast. A story full of enchantment, betrayal, sacrifice, and finding the greatest treasure.”

—Alexis @_alexisinwonderland

“This book was a perfect combination of magical realism and historical fiction! Sarah has a masterful way of writing dual timelines, delving into the historical aspects and relating to the current-day struggles as well.”

—Christine Patronick @christineanne4

“This absolute page turner weaves intrigue, romance, magic and adventure in a story that will force you to keep reading to see where the twists will take you next!”

—Pamela Siegel Zinnel @bookwormpbz



AMALFI CURSE

SARAH PENNER



PARK
ROW
BOOKS

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For my husband, Marc



*Upon the whirl, where sank the ship
The boat spun round and round;
And all was still, save that the hill
Was telling of the sound.*

—“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” 1798



REGISTRO DEGLI INCANTESIMI MARINI



REGISTER OF INCANTATIONS PRACTICED BY THE STREGHE, OR SEA
WITCHES, OF AMALFI

incantesimo di riflusso An incantation to urge water away (ebb).
Attrezzo: a belemnite fossil.

incantesimo di flusso An incantation to draw water forth (flow).
Attrezzo: a mother-of-pearl shell.

***incantesimo
divinatorio*** An incantation to discern the location of
items in the water. *Attrezzo:* a strand of six

sea-derived hagstones.

***incantesimo
raffreddare***

An incantation to lower the temperature of the water via a cold-water column.

Attrezzo: a dried Chondrichthyes egg-sack, or “mermaid’s purse.”

***incantesimo
dell’elemento***

An incantation to alter the composition of the water. *Attrezzo*: a fossilized sawfish snout, or “mermaid’s comb.”

incantesimo vortice

An incantation to conjure a maelstrom or whirlpool. No *attrezzo* required.

vortice centuriaria

An incantation to conjure a powerful maelstrom or whirlpool enduring for one hundred years. No *attrezzo* required, but the *strega* must remove her protective *cimaruta* necklace to perform this incantation.

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PROLOGUE



Letter to Matteo Mazza in Naples, Italy

Monday, April 9, 1821

Signor Mazza:

We have not formerly made each other's acquaintance, yet I pray you will take very seriously what I have to say.

You are the owner of Naples's most preeminent shipping company, and your business is at the mercy of the sea. Yet as of late, I've become convinced the sea is at the mercy of something else: a small group of women living in Positano.

Many have marveled, in years past, over the tiny fishing village's good fortune and its consistently favorable seaside conditions. The tides, for one, are suspiciously calm. Mariners often remark on the village's lack of

erosion, yet it is hardly protected by a natural reef, and it is not nestled inside a cove. Why do the battered cliffs of Amalfi and Minori suffer collapses and dangerous cascades of rock, yet Positano does not?

The glut of redfish and *pezzogne*, too. How is it that on days when the fishermen from other places return with bycatch or empty nets, the men of Positano have—yet again—a superb haul? Even at a quarter moon. It is as though the lunar rhythms have no effect on this village.

Ah, but tides and fish are one thing. Pirates, well, they are quite another. Now, I don't mean to make assumptions about those with whom you associate, Signor Mazza, but surely you are aware of this incongruity: there is no record of pirates having ever landed in Positano.

These buccaneers sack ships in Sicily. They ransack from Salerno to Capri. If I were to prick a pin in a map marking everywhere pirates have landed along our coast, it would appear a perfect band, skirting the whole edge of the Amalfi coastline—every village but one. One!

Dare I say, Positano seems insulated. Protected. Favored.

Elsewhere on the peninsula, men lament their filthy seawater, the looters, bad catch. *Yes, Positano has been prosperous*, they tell me, *but we will never move our families there, for their luck will run out. Any day now. Mark my words.*

Even some of Positano's own are bewildered by their good fortune. The men keep well-armed, sure they are due for a pirate attack. Others salt and dry and bottle their fish, certain their waters will soon dry up. Still others refuse to build too close to the shore: the cliffs will crumble eventually, they say, sending those hilltop residents to their rocky deaths.

There is something going on in Positano—a secret, very closely guarded.

And I believe I know precisely what this secret is.

Might we strike a deal, Signor Mazza? For a price, I am willing to reveal what I know—to tell you what I have learned, what I have seen. *Who* I have seen.

I can only imagine the fortune such information would bring you.

Please respond at your soonest convenience.

Signed,

Your devoted friend, associate &c.

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MARI

Wednesday, April 11, 1821

long a dark seashore beneath the cliffside village of Positano, twelve women, aged six to forty-four, were seated in a circle. It was two o'clock in the morning, the waxing moon directly overhead.

One of the women stood, breaking the circle. Her hair was the color of vermillion, as it had been since birth. Fully clothed, she walked waist-high into the water. A belemnite fossil clutched between her fingers, she plunged

her hands beneath the waves and began to move her lips, reciting the first part of the *incantesimo di riflusso* she'd learned as a child. Within moments, the undercurrent she'd conjured began to swirl at her ankles, tugging southward, away from her.

A She shuffled her way out of the water and back onto the shore. A second woman with lighter hair, the color of persimmon, stood from the circle. She, too, approached the ocean and plunged her hands beneath the surface. She recited her silent spell on the sea, satisfied as the undercurrent grew even stronger. She gazed out at the horizon, a steady black line where the sky met the sea, and smiled.

Like the other villagers along the coast tonight, these women knew what was coming: a fleet of pirate ships making their way northeast from Tunis. Winds were favorable, their sources said, and the flotilla was expected within the next day.

Their destination? Perhaps Capri, Sorrento, Majori. Some thought maybe even Positano—maybe, finally, Positano.

Given this, fishermen all along the Amalfi coastline had decided to remain at home with their families tomorrow and into the night. It wouldn't be safe on the water. The destination of these pirates was unknown, and what they sought was a mystery, as well. Greedy pirates went for all kinds of loot. Hungry pirates went for nets full of fish. Lustful pirates went for the women.

On the seashore, a third and final woman stood from the circle. Her hair was the rich, deep hue of blood. Quickly, she undressed. She didn't like the feeling of wet fabric against her skin, and these women had seen her naked a thousand times before.

Belemnite fossil in one hand, she held the end of a rope in her other, which was tied to a heavy anchor in the sand a short distance away. She would be the one to recite the final piece of this current-curse. Her recitation was the most important, the most potent, and after it was done, the ebbing undercurrent would be even more severe—hence the rope, which she would wrap tightly around herself before finishing the spell.

It was perilous, sinister work. Still, of the twelve women by the water tonight, twenty-year-old Mari DeLuca was the most befitting for this final task.

They were *streghe del mare*—sea witches—with unparalleled power over the ocean. They boasted a magic found nowhere else in the world, a result of their lineage, having descended from the sirens who once inhabited the tiny Li Galli islets nearby.

The women knew that tomorrow, wherever the pirates landed, it would not be Positano. The men would not seize their goods, their food, their daughters. No matter how the pirate ships rigged their sails, they would not find easy passageway against the undercurrent the women now drew upward from the bottom of the sea. They would turn east, or west. They would go elsewhere.

They always did.

While the lineage of the other eleven women was twisted and tangled, filled with sons or muddled by marriage, Mari DeLuca's line of descent was perfectly intact: her mother had been a *strega*, and her mother's mother, and so on and so on, tracing back thousands of years to the sirens themselves. Of the women on the seashore tonight, Mari was the only *strega finisima*.

This placed upon her shoulders many great responsibilities. She could instinctively read the water better than any of them. Her spells were the most effective, too; she alone could do what required two or three other *streghe* working in unison. As such, she was the sanctioned leader of the eleven other women. The forewoman, the teacher, the decision-maker.

Oh, but what a shame she hated the sea as much as she did.

Stepping toward the water, Mari unraveled her long plait of hair. It was her most striking feature—such blood-colored hair was almost unheard of in Italy, much less in the tiny fishing village of Positano—but then, much of what Mari had inherited was unusual. She tensed as the cold waves rushed over her feet. *My mother should be the one doing this*, she thought bitterly. It was a resentment she'd never released, not in twelve years, since the night

when eight-year-old Mari had watched the sea claim her mother, Imelda, as its own.

On that terrible night, newly motherless and reeling, Mari knew the sea was no longer her friend. But worse than this, she worried for her younger sister, Sofia. How would Mari break this news to her? How could she possibly look after spirited Sofia with as much patience and warmth as their *mamma* had once done?

She'd hardly had time to grieve. The next day, the other *streghe* had swiftly appointed young Mari as the new *strega finisima*. Her mother had taught her well, after all, and she was, by birthright, capable of more than any of them. No one seemed to care that young Mari was so tender and heartbroken or that she now despised the very thing she had such control over.

But most children lose their mothers at some point, don't they? And sprightly Sofia had been reason enough to forge on—a salve to Mari's aching heart. Sofia had kept her steady, disciplined. Even cheerful, much of the time. So long as Sofia was beside her, Mari would shoulder the responsibilities that had been placed upon her, willingly or not.

Now, toes in the water, a pang of anguish struck Mari, as it often did at times like this.

Neither *Mamma* nor Sofia was beside her tonight.

Mari let out a slow exhale. This moment was an important one, worth remembering. It was the end of two years' worth of agonizing indecision. No one else on the seashore knew it, but this spell, this incantation she was about to recite, would be her very last. She was leaving in only a few weeks' time, breaking free. And the place she was going was mercifully far from the sea.

Eyes down, Mari slipped her naked body beneath the water, cursing the sting of it as it seeped into a small rash on her ankle. At once, the water around her turned from dark blue to a thick inky black, like vinegar. Mari had dealt with this all her life: the sea mirrored her mood, her temperament.