

David Blanco Laserna

POISONING GALILEO

SCIENCE
CODE



ANAYA
ENGLISH

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*To Raquel and Yango,
two antidotes for poisons*

CHAPTER ONE

The young man with the lute

Although the weatherman hates to admit it, there are storms that he can't predict. There are ferocious hurricanes that walk their first steps on a sunny afternoon, under a clear sky and the most idyllic of sceneries. For example, in the magnificent garden of Mateo Scarpaci's, the rich merchant in Pisa, where not even ants worry about being crushed by a footstep.

Above one of the galleries of the courtyard, the climbing plants weave an awning made of little dark green leaves, as if they had just been cut out in glossy paper. In the shade, next to a big cinnamon coloured plant pot where a peacock is sleeping, two youngsters are seated: Caterina and Galileo. Don't talk to them now about supernatural crimes or ask them about the alchemist's revenge or about Prince Lorenzino of Mantua's murder. They still don't know anything about them. However, the tempest has already started, and before they know it we will find them in the eye of the hurricane.

We're in 1583. Or at least, they are.

The sun feels inspired in this February afternoon and it doesn't spare a single colour, from violet to Naples yellow, to paint on the sky's canvas a magnificent sunset. None of the youngsters are in the mood to notice it.

Galileo covers himself with a ragged university student's toga on which moths have had unforgettable banquets; in terms of stains it could compete with a giraffe's fur. Caterina is wearing a blue satin dress, with ermine sleeves, and has her hair decorated with silk thread and put up in a jewel hairnet.

Galileo nervously drums his fingers on a lute case, Caterina mistreats the corners of small sheet of paper with the lyrics of a song that is extremely popular among the Florentine youth: *Love, doomed love*. They are arguing fiercely now.

* * *

'I can't understand you.'

'What is it that you can't understand?'

Galileo's body contorted in a mute expression, meaning that for him the answer was obvious.

'What?' Caterina insisted.

'How do you mean "what"? You've just rejected me. What do you think? That doesn't make any sense, however you want to look at it.'

'Should it make any sense?'

'It should. Everything makes some sense, from the movement of the stars to a donkey's bray.'

Caterina blinked, not knowing if she was being compared to a star or if he was suggesting that she sang worse than a donkey.

'Well, then it must make sense.'

‘Well, I can’t find any sense in it. Unless you change your mind...’

‘Well, then it probably doesn’t make any sense.’

Galileo took Caterina’s hand between his. When she felt the rough touch of his skin, she couldn’t help shivering: there was some ink hiding under the young medical student’s fingernails; instead of wearing rings, his fingers were adorned with stains that were resistant to soap and the bites from the acid poured in obscure alchemichal experiments. To make things worse, those hands had probably just been dissecting some corpse.

‘Do you realise what I’m offering you?’

‘Of course I do,’ Caterina wouldn’t take her eyes away from her hand.

‘Stop joking!’

‘I’m not joking!’ The young girl took advantage of Galileo’s impulsiveness to slip away from him.

He clenched his fists and teeth.

‘I’m the most intelligent person you’ve ever met!’ Pride was sizzling out of his ears, as if his head were a tea-pot with two spouts.

‘And I don’t love you.’

‘That’s what doesn’t make sense! If you thought about it...’

‘I don’t need to think about it.’

‘You obviously aren’t thinking about it.’

‘I don’t need to think about it! I need to feel it.’

The peacock showed its head, and when it saw the situation, it went back to its hiding place. Caterina softened her tone of voice.

‘Look, Galileo. You’re the best of friends. Someone really important for me...’

‘Stop it, stop it,’ he covered his ears. ‘Who wants to be your friend? I’ve got lots of friends. And lots of enemies too. I’ve got everything. I want you.’

‘I’m really sorry.’

Was she really sorry? He felt as if she were avoiding to tell him about her true feelings.

‘Do you know what I think?’

‘Don’t say it, please,’ Caterina swallowed hard. ‘It won’t do us any good.’

Galileo didn’t agree. So he said what he thought.

Caterina sighed.

The last sentence had killed the conversation. Galileo took the lute by its body and went away. At that moment he would have died for a good slam of the door that would make the three floors of the Scarpaci residence shake, but in the garden there were no doors. He had to content himself with hitting a climbing plant. The plant had plenty of thorns. Galileo took them all.

‘Ouch!’

And he walked away down the street, sucking his finger.

The young man who ran into the crowd in *Piazza di Porci* was a steaming pot of emotions, where one could have boiled three apples, a carrot, a bunch of celery, a bay leaf and even a wild boar. As he didn’t have all those ingredients available, what was boiling in him was his blood. His heart was beating to the rhythm of war drums. Who cared? They were calling for a battle that he had already lost.

Caterina didn’t love him.

At the age of nineteen, Galileo Galilei felt that he had hit rock bottom. Like a Polynesian fisherman, he had taken a deep plunge following the magnetism of a black pearl. But before catching it, the shell closed itself by surprise,

pinching his fingers, and he didn't know how to slip away from it and return to the surface. He was drowning. Being used to getting his own way, now he didn't know where to hide his frustration.

Galileo was a scandalous young man, who was friendly, somewhat impertinent and so bright that he could outshine any other personality. Wherever you found him, in a button upholsterer's workshop or eating pistachios by the statue of the Grand Duke Cosimo I, he caught your attention. His main defect was that he wasn't able to keep his mouth closed. His shrewdness was a scalpel with which he practised all the time, and which sooner or later ended up hurting someone's pride. His university classmates called him the Troublemaker and at the same time admired his intelligence and his ability to notice facts that others couldn't see, or to bombard teachers with questions that they didn't know how to answer.

He was so convinced of his talent that he didn't care about his future, which involved a conflict between his father's reasons (that had led him to studying Medicine) and his own: drawing, music and an eccentric liking for mathematics, which he secretly studied.

Something there was no doubt about was that Caterina and him made the ideal couple, like cream and chocolate, minced meat and spaghetti, a foot and its sock. She appreciated his sense of humour and didn't pay too much attention to his impertinence, or she sometimes even set him straight with an even more incisive reply. On their way to the Scarpaci residence, the whole world had been flooded by his love for the young lady. There were promising signs all around him: the joyful hammering of craftsmen, the familiar scents coming out of homes, the children's

playful excitement and the lively street markets. If she had fallen in his arms to say yes, Pisa would have become a madrigal, a painting by Leonardo, a theorem by Archimedes... But after her denial, Pisa seemed to him like a dog's bark, a hen's excrement, a meaningless mess. Why hadn't he been able to interpret the signs that were warning him of the catastrophe every step of the way?: the unpleasant noise of the craftsmen, the lousy smells coming out of houses, the children's shouting and the hateful bargaining of the street vendors.

When he passed by Skinny's tavern, Galileo stopped immediately: he knew he had reached his destination. Over the entrance door, hanging from a rusty wall bracket, there was a swinging wooden board with the picture of a sinister goose, which looked as if it had just come out from a turpentine bath.

It looked as if all the wooden boards of that dive were held together by the dirt, working as a kind of glue. Luckily, the puffs of smoke from pipes and the soot from the stoves weaved an impenetrable fog that concealed the details: the dirty greasy marks on the benches, the coming and going of rats, and a cat with a distemper, which its old doormat skin dragged among the cobwebs.

Twenty pairs of eyes—including those of a couple of one-eyed people— followed the young student to the bar, where he asked for a jug of wine. As soon as they saw him enter with the lute hanging on his back and Cupid's arrow across his heart, and they heard the tinkling of the coins in the little bag that he was carrying tied to his belt, the joy felt among Skinny's customers was unanimous; deep down inside each of them chose the word they thought to be the funniest one, but all of them had the same meaning: the

unpredictable destiny was showing them a real dupe. (Or if you prefer a fool, a loser, a chump, a loafer).

And twenty pairs of hands—including those of a couple of one-handed men—rubbed when Galileo cleared his throat before asking if he could join a game, in which three thieves, Moscardone, Scarabocchio and Gattamorta, were stealing money from one another.

They ceremoniously made some room for him at the table. The deck of cards was cut and the cards were dealt; two cards each. They were playing *primiera*, an Italian kind of card game. Galileo left on the chipped table a shiny lute, naked among the rest of the coins, which covered themselves modestly with a layer of dirt.

That is the way in which the most memorable game ever played on Skinny's tavern's ragged tablecloths began.

Have you ever heard the saying that goes: 'Unlucky in love, lucky at cards'? Well it could have been invented that afternoon in the town of Pisa. In front of a devoted audience full of crooks, Galileo won round after round, like a record holder clearing hurdles.

The victory got to his head before the strong Bar-dolino wine did. The game was offering his hurt pride a way out, even if it was through the back door.

'Take that! I accept the stake and I double it. *Fluxus* of four kings. I win again. Ha!'

Moscardone, Scarabocchio and Gattamorta observed the display of figures on the tablecloth, as if they were caricatures trying to ridicule them. Behind their backs, a choir of giggles was echoing the young man with the lute's loud laughter.

Galileo probably thought the atmosphere was not charged enough:

‘How useless you all are. They shouldn’t allow you to get near a deck of cards!’

‘Shut-your-mouth,’ Moscardone passed the three syllables through the mincer of his broken back teeth.

Each time Galileo joined a pair of aces, a resentment trio could be heard.

‘You can’t beat me even if you cheat, can you, useless guys?’

‘CHEAT?’

‘USELESS GUYS?’

Once again the young man paid no attention to the warning signs: the wildly throbbing vein on Gattamorta’s temple, Scarabocchio’s teeth gritting, a nasty grin that disfigured Moscardone’s already repulsive mouth... With a smack on the table he threw his cards to Gattamorta. From his sleeve two or three more cards fell as a bonus. Galileo picked up a *fante di bastoni* (a jack of clubs) and triumphantly showed its back side.

‘You have marked them in such a sloppy way that all the time I know what cards you’re getting.’

A bomb of silence made all the whispers and quiet talk blow up. The tense atmosphere could have been cut with a knife. And there were more than twenty knives hidden in the tavern.

‘ARE YOU CALLING US CHEATS?’

‘Not at all. I’m calling you idiots. Well... do you fancy another game?’

Galileo put the jack back in the deck.

Gattamorta took out a dagger from his chest.

Moscardone, a carpenter’s chisel.

Scarabocchio broke a bottle against the board of the table.



‘So who’s the fool now?’ Gattamorta’s teeth (no more than five) shook in his mouth when he laughed.

Galileo’s expression was a real sight to see. It showed a bit of everything: uncertainty, alarm, anger, panic...

‘I’m unarmed and you’re three against one!’ he reproached them.

‘Look at the “clever guy”, he seems to be good at maths...’

Without touching the money on the table, Galileo got up and tried to reach the door. Gattamorta and Mocola, his rusty four-bladed dagger, got in his way.

‘Where are you going in such a hurry, you coward?’

The young man tried changing his tactic.

‘Is it about the money? You can take it. I was only playing for fun... I’ll pay for the next round.’

‘Too little, too late’, he could read in Moscardone’s squinty eyes.

‘Two rounds? Three? Come on. Maybe an open bar?’

‘Don’t even doubt that the money will end up in our pockets, you brat...’

‘Then we agree on that.’

‘...After having cut up your belly...’

‘Well, let’s see, we don’t agree on that one so much...’

‘...And carving you up.’

Galileo stepped back:

‘Oh... Sounds great, your plan. Really, I would love to stay, but it’s getting a bit late for me... I’m sure we can...’

Gattamorta stabbed his belly.

It was one of those moments when our perception of the passing of time becomes altered. Each second seemed a bit longer, until they adopted the slow rhythm of hours. Galileo saw the steel lightning trying to reach his body and

then noticed the two figures who were standing up in the background. He recognised them. They had stayed away during the game, minding their own businesses. Both the game and the distance had prevented him from paying attention to their conversation, but their attitude had caught his attention. The oldest one, a middle-aged man, imposed his authority gracefully and naturally. The youngest one, of the same age as Galileo, very rarely intervened to protest heatedly, never wanting to go beyond the strict limits of respect.

Two blades clashed against each other in front of Galileo's belly button: a rapier got in the way of Gattamorta's dagger. The strangers, when they were sitting, couldn't hide how tall they were; now they formed an impenetrable barrier to protect the imprudent player.

'Mind your own business,' Scarabocchio managed to say, not less surprised than Galileo.

'Excuse our interference,' said the older one, who was holding the rapier, 'but you were attacking an unarmed loudmouth. And before you even touch one of his hairs, you will have to step over my dead body.'

'If you insist...'

Gattamorta tried to give a second stab. This time his rival didn't even try to stop it. The stranger stepped aside, took the thief by the nape of the neck and used the impulse of his attack to smash him against the wall. The rapier flew to a shadowy corner, where a stifled groan could be heard. Meanwhile, the younger stranger, after having disarmed Scarabocchio with a blow, took Moscardone by his shirt and pulled him up as if he were a feather pillow. Then, while holding him up, he walked him around the tavern, defying the twenty pairs of eyes who were watching his

display of strength in amazement. Not even Skinny dared to open his mouth. The giant unloaded Moscardone on the bar as if he were delivering a sack of potatoes.

‘Take the money and get out of my sight,’ exclaimed the older one, kicking the table and pouring a cascade of cards and coins.

The three of them hurried to obey him, above all, because the public, without hesitation, was already starting to pick up the coins for themselves.

The young man with the lute went out the same way that he had come in, with everyone looking at him, although he now was escorted. Those present were about to say good-bye to him with a standing ovation. The ‘dupe’ had given them a night to remember.

In the cool street air, Galileo had to lean on a wall so as not to faint. At the end of the street the sailcloth of the boats that were pitching on the Arno were visible, moving up and down as if the river were getting out of control, like a seaquake. In fact, the whole town was swinging in Galileo’s head because of the wine.

‘Thank you. You have saved my life,’ he stammered in an emotional tone of voice.

‘Well, you’ve said it yourself!’ the younger stranger agreed.

‘No offence,’ the older stranger said, ‘but haven’t you learnt when to keep your mouth shut yet?’

‘Or to choose the people you play with better?’ the other one added.

Galileo was barely listening. His high tide of adrenaline was moving back, leaving an empty space that made breathing difficult.

‘Caterina...’

The two giants looked at each other.

‘Caterina doesn’t love me,’ Galileo announced, about to cry.

‘She doesn’t love us either,’ the older giant winked at him. ‘Let’s cry together, but we’d better do it in another tavern where wine is not so watered down: Skinny’s light red wine was too light. There you will tell us your version of the oldest and best-know story in the whole wide world.

‘Which one is it, man?’ the young man asked.

‘They usually title it JILTED.’

‘Is it a comedy?’

‘For those listening it certainly is. But for the one telling the story it seems the worst tragedy.’

‘And does it have a happy ending?’

‘Only for the audience.’

At the age of nineteen, young Galileo Galilei was scandalous, friendly, somewhat impertinent and so bright that he could outshine any other personality. His main defect was that he wasn't able to keep his mouth closed. To make matters worse, he'll come across several challenges: a charming young lady (determined to ignore him), five supernatural murders, a gang of thieves and dishonest people, a brainless gentleman and a league of poisoners who intend to sow terror in the court of the Duke of Mantua.

Also, in this book you will find:

- A short biography of Galileo Galilei
- His most important discoveries and inventions
- The mathematical keys of encrypted messages and their application to e-mail messages
- An experiment at the Tower of Pisa

And you will expand your knowledge about:

- **Natural Science (Physics)**
 - The universe
 - The Solar System
 - Mathematical observations
 - The kinematic laws

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