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Book III of The Magdalene Line

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*For Lorenzo,
to fulfill a promise
five hundred years in the keeping.*

*And for all of you
who recognize your own promise
and are committed to bringing about
the Golden Age of a new Renaissance.*

The Time Returns

We honor God while praying for a time
when these teachings will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.

THE PRAYER OF THE ORDER OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER

PROLOGUE

Rome, AD 161

The Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius was not a butcher.

A scholar and philosopher, Pius did not want to be remembered by history as one of Rome's cruel and intolerant tyrants. Yet here he stood, literally up to his ankles in the blood of Christians. While alive, the four brothers had been exceptionally beautiful young men. But after their terrible deaths brought about by beatings and torture, they were unrecognizable masses of blood and flesh. The sight made him want to retch, but he could not appear to be weak before his citizens.

Pius was, for the most part, tolerant of the irksome minority who called themselves Christians. He even found it stimulating to participate in debates with those who were educated and reasonable. However odd he personally found their beliefs—about the single messiah who rose from the dead and would come again—their ideas did appear to be spreading at an unnervingly steady pace throughout Rome. A number of Roman nobles had converted to Christianity openly, and their participation in Christian rituals was tolerated by his government. This growing sect was also finding particular popularity with highborn females; women were included as equals in all its rites and ceremonies. They could even be priests in this strange new world of Christian thought and practice.

The Roman priests who held court in the temples of Jupiter and Saturn were up in arms that these Christians were allowed to offend the gods with their ridiculous concept of a single deity. Emperor Pius generally ignored the priests' wailings, and thus life in Rome went on in relative peace during much of his reign. It was only when some aberration developed to endanger lives in the Roman republic, some tragedy or natural disaster, that the Christians found themselves mortally threatened. The Roman priests, and their followers, were quick to blame the Christians for any and all misfortunes that might befall Rome. Surely it was their monotheistic insult to the true gods of the republic that caused divine retribution to fall on the other innocent and obedient citizens?

Emperor Pius had himself discovered in his debates that there were two types of Christians: the wild-eyed fanatics who often seemed anxious to die to

prove their great piety, and the truly reasonable and compassionate adherents who were more devoted to helping the poor and healing the sick than they were to preaching and converting. Pius definitely preferred the latter type; they were making a positive contribution to their communities and were valuable citizens. These Christians, whom he called the Compassionates, were fond of telling stories of their messiah and his great healing ability and of quoting his very wise words about the need for charity. Most often, they spoke passionately about the power of love and its many forms. Indeed there were even some Christians here in Rome who claimed direct descent from their messiah himself, through his children who had settled in Europe. These claimants were the same Compassionates who worked tirelessly to help the suffering and the poor. Their undisputed leader was a stunning and charismatic noblewoman called Lady Petronella. The flame-haired Petronella was beloved by the people of Rome, despite her openly Christian practices, as she was the daughter and heiress of one of Rome's oldest families. She used her wealth generously for the highest good of the republic and preached only of the need for love and tolerance. If Petronella and her Compassionates, had been the only kind of Christian in Rome, this onslaught of terrible bloodshed would likely never have begun.

But the group of Christians that Pius referred to as the Fanatics were another story altogether. In contrast to the Compassionates, who spoke of their messiah in warm and devoted tones as the great teacher of a spiritual path they called the Way of Love, the Fanatics screeched of the one true God who would eliminate all others and bring about a reign of terror for the unbelievers at a time of final judgment. The Romans were deeply offended by this perspective, and the Fanatics compounded the offense by insisting that life on earth did not matter and that only the afterlife was of importance. Such a philosophy, such a craven disregard for the gift of life that the gods bestowed upon mortals, was absolute sacrilege to the Roman priests and their followers. It was incomprehensible to a culture of people who celebrated the experience of the physical senses in their countless spiritual and civic festivals. To most Romans, the Fanatics were an enigma born out of madness, a group to be shunned if not feared.

Thus it was the Fanatics who raised the ire of the Roman people, even when there were no natural disasters to contend with. But when a deadly influenza outbreak struck an affluent Roman suburb, the priests of Saturn began to cry for the blood of Christians to appease their god.

In the center of this growing drama was a wealthy Roman widow, the Lady Felicita. Felicita had converted to Christianity when, overcome by grief following the sudden death of her noble and beloved husband, she had turned

her back on the Roman gods. It was said that, left alone to raise seven sons without a father, she went mad with the anguish of her loss. Felicita was visited by Christians who offered her comfort in her mourning, and she ultimately found strength and so-

lace in the Fanatics' extreme perspective on the absolute importance of the afterlife. In this ideal, Felicita was consoled that her husband was in a better place where she would join him one day, and they would be together with their children as a family in heaven.

While Felicita burned with the passion of the newly converted, most of the nobles in her community were not overly upset by her behavior. Felicita would spend hours each day on her knees in prayer, but most felt that this was her own business. In addition, Felicita was charitable and generous, donating portions of her dead husband's fortune to the building of a hospital and compelling her older sons to contribute physical labor to help the infirm. As a result, Felicita's strong and beautiful children were very popular with the people of the Roman suburb in which they dwelled. The boys ranged in age from the golden-haired youngest, called Martial, who was in his seventh summer, to the tall and athletic eldest, Januarius, who was twenty years on earth.

The world in which Felicita and her sons lived remained relatively peaceful until the influenza swept into their town. It struck intermittently and at random, but those who were afflicted by it rarely survived the extreme fevers that accompanied the retching and convulsions. When the firstborn son of a Saturnian priest succumbed to the illness, the distraught man rallied the population to join him in accusing Felicita and her sons of bringing down the wrath of the gods upon them. Clearly, Saturn had punished his own priest to make his point clear: the Romans would need to be strong in their opposition to these Christian people who dared to regard their true gods as obsolete. The gods would not stand for it, and certainly not a god such as Saturn, who was the domineering and ruthless patriarch of the Roman pantheon. Hadn't Saturn even devoured his own son when he found him to be disobedient?

Felicita and all seven of her children were subsequently brought before the regional magistrate, Publius. Because of Felicita's noble status, they were not shackled by chains or tied but were allowed to enter the court of their own volition. Felicita was a handsome woman, tall and well built, with flowing dark hair and the walk of a queen. She stood straight and proud before the court, never wavering and showing no fear.

The proceedings began calmly and were carried out with due order. While Magistrate Publius was known to have a harsh streak when provoked, he was not as monstrous as some of the local jurists were known to be. He read out

the charges against Felicita and her sons in measured tones.

“Lady Felicita, you and your children have been brought to this court today under suspicion. The citizens of Rome have grave concerns that you have angered our gods, most specifically, that you have offended Saturn, the great father of the gods. Saturn has taken vengeance upon your community, claiming the lives of a number of your neighbors, including innocent children, as a result. The laws of our people state that ‘refusal to accept the gods angers the gods and disrupts the forces of the universe. When the gods have been angered, those culprits who have caused their consternation must beg forgiveness by making sacrifices to them.’ Therefore you and your children are commanded to worship in the Temple of Saturn for eight days, making appropriate sacrifices as designated by the priests until the god has been appeased. Do you accept this as a fair and just sentence?”

Felicita stood mute before the court, her children standing in a line behind her, equally silent.

Publius repeated the question, adding, “You do understand that the alternative is death? Failure to appease the gods puts our entire nation at risk. Thus you will perform your sacrifices or you will die. The choice is yours.”

Publius’ exasperation grew as Felicita made him wait for what seemed an interminable amount of time. When it became clear that she did not have any intention of speaking, the magistrate eventually snapped. “You offend the authority of this court and the people of Rome with your silence. I demand your answer, or it will be beaten from you.”

Felicita raised her head to look directly at Publius. When she finally replied, it was with the fire of conviction in her eyes and in her words.

“Do not threaten me, heathen. The spirit of the One God is with me and will overcome every assault you make upon me and my family, as he can take us to a place where you will never go. I will not enter a pagan temple nor make sacrifices to your powerless gods. Nor will my children. Not ever. So do not waste your breath further with this request. If you would punish us, do so and be done with it. But I do not fear you, and my sons do not fear you. They are as strong in their conviction as I am, and will remain so.”

“Woman, do you dare to bring the lives of your children into jeopardy over your misguided ideals?”

Publius was dumbstruck by her response. The sentence he had passed upon this Christian family was unprecedented in its leniency by all Roman standards. He was certain she would breathe a sigh of relief and guide her brood of boys quietly to the temple to begin their shared penance. Was it

possible that Felicita would risk the lives of her entire family over an eight-day temple requirement?

Publius continued, less measured now. His shock and growing irritation crept into his voice. “Beware before you speak again, as this court has the power to see all of you punished most severely for your crimes.”

Felicita very nearly spat her reply. “I said, do not threaten me, foul pagan. Your words are empty. You cannot punish me in any way that will change my mind, so spare your breath. If this means you must put me to death, then do so and be quick about it so that I may reach my God and be reunited with my husband. If my children must die with me, they will do so gladly, as they know what awaits them in the afterlife is far greater than anything you can imagine on this terrible earth.”

Publius was now utterly outraged. It was unnatural, even monstrous, for any mother to offer up her children for sacrifice. What twisted god was this that the Christians worshipped who would require the lives of seven children to appease his bloodlust?

The magistrate’s voice boomed through the court. “Unhappy woman, if you wish to die, so then die, but do not destroy your children in the process! Send them to the temple so that they may live.”

Felicita’s reply was a scream that shook the stones of the courtroom. “My children will live forever no matter what you do to them! You have no power over them or over me.”

Publius spluttered at her audacity before ordering Felicita to be placed in chains and sent into a holding cell. As she was dragged out of the court, she shouted to her sons, “My children, look up to heaven where Jesus Christ awaits you with the only true God. Be faithful and courageous so that we may all be united in heaven. If one of you falters, all is lost! Do not fail me!”

Once their mother had been removed, the magistrate spoke to the children. The youngest two were in tears but trying hard to keep them in check, chins buried in their chests and little bodies nearly convulsing with sobs. Publius, himself a father of boys, felt pity for these small ones, innocent victims of their mother’s madness. He addressed Felicita’s children as a group.

“Your mother is a misguided woman who would threaten the lives and security of all Rome with her offenses. You do not have to follow her terrible example. This court recognizes each of you individually and promises leniency and pardon to you. All you must do is renounce these words of your mother and agree to accompany the priests to the Temple of Saturn and make appropriate reparations to that god for having offended him. This will restore

peace to the land and abolish the plague that has killed your innocent neighbors.”

He watched the silent seven, the younger ones all with eyes downcast, and addressed the final question to the elder four. “Do you not wish to see the end of suffering in your community? For this is in your power. Your actions have brought plague and death to your neighbors. You now have the opportunity to correct that and set things to right.”

The eldest son, Januarius, answered for all of them. He was the image of his mother both physically and spiritually. Januarius replied with her same fervor. He stated, voice steady and strong, that he would gladly die before entering a pagan temple and that he would take his brothers with him to heaven rather than see them corrupted by heathens. Further, he defended the honor of his pious mother, punctuating his last sentence by spitting on the shoes of the magistrate.

That final act of disrespect turned the heart of Publius to stone. He made his deadly decision in that moment. If Januarius was intent upon dying for his mother and her monster god, then he would be given the opportunity to do just that. Perhaps if Felicita was made to witness the gruesome death of her own firstborn son, she would recant and save the others.

This kind of flagrant disobedience to the Republic and its gods could not be allowed to go unpunished, particularly as it had been witnessed in a public forum. A bloody spectacle to warn other Christians against such crimes was most assuredly warranted and in the best interest of the peace and prosperity of Rome.



Januarius was dragged into the public forum and shackled to a whipping post. His mother and three older brothers were given seats near enough to be splattered by his blood with every blow that split his flesh. The younger children, still seen as victims by Publius and the other magistrates of the court, were held in custody away from the execution.

The first executioner was a huge man whose arm muscles bulged as he brought the whip down with all his strength across the prisoner’s back, over and over again. At intervals during this flogging of Januarius, the magistrates ordered the executioner to pause. They first asked the condemned if he would like to recant and accept his punishment—and live. Januarius spit on them the first three times. The fourth time he was closer to death than to life and was unable to respond. Thus the final appeal went out to his mother.

“Woman, this is your oldest child, the blood of your union with your husband. How can you watch his torment and not recant? If you accept your penance, he may still live and you will save your other children.”

Felicita refused to acknowledge the magistrates. She spoke only to Januarius, but her voice was loud and sure. “My son, embrace your father for me, for all of us, as he awaits you at the gates of heaven. Think no more about this earthly life which means nothing. Go to where God awaits, my child!”

It did not take many more lashes to end the life of Januarius. His blood seeped away into congealing pools as the lashes tore open what was left of his body. When he was declared dead, the executioner unshackled the corpse and dragged it just far enough to be out of the way yet still in sight of Felicita and her three elder sons.

This spectacle of horror repeated itself three more times as each of Felicita’s elder children refused to accept the judgment of the court. Several executioners had to be brought in, as the effort needed to beat each young man to death was too exhausting for any single man, regardless of his size and strength. By the fall of darkness, Felicita had watched as four of her children were flogged to death. She had, in fact, encouraged their deaths by torture. There was no indication that she was going to recant, no matter how gruesome the methods used to kill her children. With each child lost, she appeared to be gaining strength in her twisted version of faith.

The magistrate Publius was now faced with a terrible dilemma. He had no desire to execute the younger boys, who were innocent victims of their mother’s madness. And yet Felicita, strangely, appeared to be winning in this battle. She had not broken during the execution of her children, not once. There were no tears and no wincing. Her condemnation of the court and of the pagan priests grew louder and more emphatic with each death. That she was mad was not in question. No mother in her right mind could endure what had occurred here today. Even the executioners were as horrified as they were exhausted by what they had done in the name of their father god, Saturn, and for the security of Rome.

But allowing Felicita’s three remaining little ones to live would show weakness. It would demonstrate that her will and faith were stronger than that of Rome and the gods.

This was how the emperor himself, Antoninus Pius, had come to be summoned to this affluent suburb for consultation, had come to be standing in the blood and gore that had once been Felicita’s elder sons. This matter had the potential to become a state crisis, and Magistrate Publius did not want the blood of the innocent younger children on

his hands if such a thing went against the emperor's will. Antoninus Pius was, himself, at a loss to determine the correct course of action in this hideous case. He considered the now infamous moment, generations earlier, when the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate had ordered the execution of Jesus the Nazarene, thereby creating the martyr around whom this strange cult was built. Pius did not want to create more martyrs whose ghosts would serve to weaken the might of Rome. He also did not want the blood of little children on his hands. But he was not certain how to avoid it. Indeed, the matter had already gone too far.

It was no doubt the most benevolent goddess of beauty and harmony, Venus herself, who smiled on him that evening by sending him an answer. When the alluring and graceful Lady Petronella arrived requesting an audience, Pius breathed a sigh of relief for the first time on that terrible day.



Lady Petronella did not have to plead her case with the emperor, although she had been fully prepared to do so. She was stunned that he seemed relieved to see her and to concede to her plan. Petronella was the popular wife of a senator, yet her status as an unapologetic, albeit gentle Christian could have made this mission difficult. Her beauty and elegance had gone far to win over the more hardened nobles of Rome, including this emperor, who was a great lover of attractive women. She came dressed in a simple cream gown, but one made from the highest-grade silk from the Orient. Her hair, the color of burnished copper in the sun, was plaited elaborately, strands of pearls woven through the coiffure. Around her long and delicate throat was an exquisite pendant with a large central ruby from which dangled three tear-shaped pearls. A smaller brooch, etched with the symbol of a rooster with ruby eyes, decorated one shoulder of her gown. To the uninitiated, Petronella's adornments were merely the trappings of a rich woman. But those who knew her intimately understood that these precious stones were the symbols of her esteemed family. The rubies and pearls indicated descent from the ancestor they referred to as the Queen of Compassion—Mary Magdalene. The rooster emblem was the symbol of the other strand of her blood, that of her sanctified great-great-great-grandfather, who was no less than Saint Peter, the first apostle of Rome. She had, in fact, been called after the apostle Peter's only child, given the name that was a feminized version of Peter.

According to the sacred family legend, Saint Peter's only daughter, the first-century saint known as Petronella, had married the youngest son of the holy family, Yeshua-David. Mary Magdalene had been heavily pregnant at the time of the crucifixion, and was spirited away to safety in Alexandria

immediately thereafter. In Egypt she gave birth to the son of Jesus, called Yeshua-David, whose own life was wondrous and powerful. It was said that on the day that Yeshua-David and the original Petronella first met as children, they became inseparable. They married and had many children, thus creating a legacy of pure Christian strength that preached the Way of Love throughout Europe. The women in this lineage subsequently married into powerful Roman families to protect their line. Staying alive to preserve the Way was their sole mission. It was their family legacy, as it had been delivered to their patriarch by Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus had given Peter his name, Petrus, meaning “the rock,” because he believed his friend the fisherman to be solid and unwavering in his commitment. He was the rock upon which Jesus could build a strong foundation for growth, one of the chosen successors to ensure that the teachings of the Way would not die. Jesus had *commanded* that Peter deny him so that he would escape persecution and live to preach another day. Sadly, Peter’s triple denial of Jesus was now infamous and often used to illustrate his weakness of character. It was just one of many injustices manufactured by the scribes who would twist Christian history for their own purposes. But Peter’s descendants knew the truth and remembered it with pride, adopting the rooster proudly as their family emblem. That Peter would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed was their Lord’s own request. Contrary to the derogatory legend, Peter was showing his strength in following the sacred orders that Jesus had given to him.

The exact words, spoken privately by Jesus to Peter on that blessed night in Gethsemane, had been passed down and memorized by all Petrus children:

Live to preach another day. You must remain. Only then will the Way of Love survive.

The words of Jesus to Saint Peter, spoken in the Garden of Gethsemane, had been distilled into the sacred family motto:

I remain.

Lady Petronella was the remaining “rock” of the Christians, and as such she must now face this predicament that could prove dangerous to their Way of Love.

Indeed, Petronella hoped to represent the legacy of her most steadfast and compassionate ancestors today with this mission to the emperor to save Felicita and her remaining children. What concerned the lady now was how much confidence Pius appeared to have in her ability to reach Felicita and to turn this situation around for Rome. While she was determined to try, Petronella had deep reservations about

the outcome of this venture. Felicita's fanaticism was legendary among the Compassionate Christians, even before her inconceivable act of offering her children up for sacrifice. Would Felicita listen to her? It was hard to know. Petronella's pedigree among Christians was pristine to the point that most nearly worshipped her. And beyond all else, she was the current guardian of the Libro Rosso, the sacred book that contained the true teachings and prophecies of the holy family. Her authority could not be argued by any reasonable Christian. But a woman who would cheer on the unspeakably brutal executions of her children as an act of faith was not a reasonable Christian.

Before requesting an audience with the emperor, Petronella had prayed long and hard for guidance. She prayed to her Lord for his strength and for the clarity to understand his will through the teachings of love. She invoked the Queen of Compassion and asked to be guided by her remarkable grace. She rubbed the central ruby of her pendant and said a final prayer.

"I remain," she whispered aloud, then steeled herself for the inevitable confrontation to come.



"Good evening, sister."

Petronella had been allowed, through intervention of the emperor, to meet with Felicita in one of the magistrate's offices. It would have been unseemly for a lady of her status to descend into the depths of the dank, fetid cell where Felicita had been held. While the prisoner had been given a clean shift to wear during the visit, she was filthy and her skin was stained with the blood of her children. Petronella winced inwardly and prayed that her horror was not immediately apparent on the surface.

The two women greeted each other as all Christians did: as siblings of the spirit. After the formalities, Felicita asked with suspicion, "Why have you come?"

Petronella's gaze was steady, her melodious voice soft. "I have come to offer my condolences for your loss and see if there is any comfort your community can provide for you in your time of grief."

Felicita appeared not to hear her at first. Then she looked at the elegant woman in surprise. "Grief? What grief?"

Petronella was taken aback. The woman must surely have lost whatever was left of her mind after what she had witnessed.

“Lady Felicita, we are all heartbroken over the loss of your beautiful boys.”

Felicita was looking past Petronella now, as if she were not there—or as if it didn’t matter if she were. She shook her head slowly and replied as if entranced, “Heartbroken? Why, sister? I am joyous on this day as my brave children did not deny their God. Our Lord Jesus Christ will welcome them into heaven and celebrate their strength and faith. Don’t you see? This is a day for rejoicing! I can only hope that tomorrow the magistrates will give orders to take the rest of us, so that we may all be together in heaven by the time the sun goes down.”

Petronella cleared her throat to give herself a moment to think. This was worse than she had anticipated.

“Sister, while I understand your great faith in the power of the afterlife, if I may say so, Jesus taught us that we must celebrate the joy of life that we have here on earth. That it is God’s great gift to us. Your three youngest sons can and should be spared so that they may grow and live in this world that God has created for them.”

“Get thee behind me, Satan!” Felicita shrieked with a venom that caused Petronella’s head to snap back as if slapped. “You ...,” she spit at the calm woman standing before her as she continued to rage, “you stand here in your Roman finery, married to a foul pagan, and yet you dare to judge me? I will not betray my God for anyone or anything, and neither will any of my children. We are righteous and God will reward us for our courage. Our reward will be togetherness in heaven in the sight of that God.”

Petronella, praying inwardly that the blessed Magdalena would send her both patience and compassion, tried a different tactic. “Felicita, your death and the deaths of your remaining children will remove powerful voices from this earth, voices that can spread the good news of our teachings and serve to educate others. Do you not think that God wants this? These young boys will grow knowing that their brothers died for their beliefs, and it will make them strong in their resolve to continue our teachings. They must remain. They will be heroes for the Way. This is what God wants from them, and from you.”

“How dare you presume to tell me what God wants? I hear him clearly, and he tells me that he wants my children to be martyrs, not heroes. He requires them as a sacrifice to his greater glory. Just as Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac.”

Petronella took a breath and explained patiently, “Yes, but Abraham was stopped before he could kill his own son. The Lord was testing him to determine his obedience, and yet once he was convinced of it, he sent the

angel of mercy, Zadakiel, to stay the hand that was holding the sacrificial knife. For it is never God's wish to see any of his children suffer. Felicita, the Lord is begging you to be that merciful angel who stays the hand of the executioner. Please, do not kill your remaining children. If you do, you will not be choosing the Way of Love. If Jesus were here with us now, he would not allow you to murder your babies. Of this, more than anything, I am most certain."

Felicita turned feverish eyes on Petronella. "Jesus is waiting for me at the gates of heaven, waiting to embrace me and to reward my courage. It is you he will reject, you who married a pagan and who concedes to your heathen neighbors at every turn."

"I love and honor my neighbors as his commandment instructs. It is not concession, Felicita. It is the Way of Love. It is tolerance."

"It is weakness!"

"There will be no Christians left if we do not embrace tolerance. Our Way will not survive if we do not learn how to live it in peace with others. The Way bids us to be patient with those who have not yet seen the light. Jesus tells us we must forgive those who do not see."

"Then I pray he will forgive you, sister." Felicita hissed the last word, making it clear that she no longer believed that Petronella was her sister. "I pray that God forgives you for your weakness and for your evil intent in coming here tonight. Only a devil would try to stop me from carrying out this ultimate sacrifice for the extreme glory of our Lord!"

Petronella had run out of patience, and there was no further need for it. It was clear that Felicita was too immersed in her twisted sacrificial fantasy to hear anything that resembled reason, or even sanity. How could she be anything else but completely invested, after sacrificing four of her children to that idea on this day?

Petronella stood to take her leave, saying quietly as she moved toward the door, "Then I shall pray for all of us, Felicita. And for everyone who dares to believe in the Way of Love."



The following morning dawned dreary with a haze that covered the sun. The priests of Saturn were declaring it an evil omen even before the news came that the plague of influenza had continued to spread through the night, killing five more. Two of the dead were children of the

temple priests.

The emperor Antoninus Pius was accosted by a cadre of angry holy men even before breakfast. They were certain that Felicita had caused this increased plague through her refusal to acknowledge the gods. She must be made to change her mind. They demanded that her surviving children be brought into court and threatened with execution one by one.

The pressure on the emperor grew more extreme as the day wore on, coming now from many regions of the republic as the legend of Felicita and her reign of terror began to spread. He finally succumbed to the weight of it, reconvening that terrible court of execution.

Felicita and her three remaining sons stood before the magistrate. She was a wild-eyed Medea now, completely diseased by the fevered fantasy in her brain, which had been fed by the blood of her eldest. The little boys were terrified, and the youngest cried openly, blond curls sticking to his wet cheeks. Pius had called Publius to his home and instructed him privately that these children must not suffer in death. If it was unavoidable for them to die, then so be it. They would die. But the torture of babies would not be his legacy.

One by one, each of the boys was called before the magistrates. Publius coaxed them, in his most gentle voice, to turn their backs on their mother and follow the priests to the temple. Felicita was chanting now, a terrible, high-pitched wail of a chant, over and over again. "Be not afraid, children. Your father and brothers await you in heaven." One by one, the children shook their heads at the magistrates, as if under their mother's hypnotic spell. As each was led forward to the chopping block, Felicita was asked if she would recant and save this child. Her response each time was a hideous laugh, a terrible parody of the sound of joy.

In the space of a single hour, three beautiful children, including one who was little more than a baby, lost their heads to the executioner's sharpest sword. He was swift with each, ensuring that the boys did not feel any pain. But when it came to the death of their mother, he was not so lenient. He used an axe instead, and it took three blows to separate the lady from her head.

Emperor Antoninus Pius fled the hideous suburb that had been forsaken by the gods that same night, never to return to it. Felicita's reign of terror was over. But he was certain that he would be forever haunted by the sound of her insane laughter and the images that accompanied it as that last, tiny, golden-haired child died on the chopping block under his command.



That evening, an exhausted Lady Petronella called a meeting of her closest brethren, the core group of Compassionates, in order to relate the terrible events of the day. She would need at least one to volunteer as a messenger, to be dispatched to Calabria. The Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher was in residence there, and they would need his sage guidance to navigate the storm that was about to descend upon the Christians in Rome.

Petronella explained to those gathered that she feared that Felicita's reign of terror was just beginning, that it would mark danger to Christians throughout the empire and begin the terrible persecutions of previous generations anew. All the progress her family had made over a hundred years to be accepted as upstanding Roman citizens, to preserve the safety of Christians, may have just been washed away by the blood of Felicita's children. The Fanatics would feed on it and become more outspoken, and the Romans would quash their uprising with the savagery that is born of fear.

She could see at the edge of her vision that something had been put into play here through these events, some terrible distortion of the teachings of their Lord that would take on a life of its own and grow into the future. It was a wicked vision, one that terrified her with the force of its darkness. She recounted it to the other Compassionates, all of whom shivered with the ring of truth in her sad prophecy.

"I fear it is the one we have called sister who has proven to be our greatest adversary. She has unleashed an unstoppable force for evil with these actions. The blood of those children will be used to rewrite the true teachings of our Lord. And words written in blood can only come from a place of utter darkness. The teachings of the Way of Love will drown in the blood of those innocents."

Petronella shuddered as the words poured out, unbidden, from some secret place where the truth of the future is held in keeping. On a terrible night such as this, her family's legacy of feminine prophecy was a most unwelcome gift.

PART ONE

The Time Returns

There exist forms of union higher
than any that can be spoken,
stronger than the greatest forces,
with the power that is their destiny.

Those who live this are no longer separated.
They are one, beyond bodily distinction.

Those who recognize each other
know the unequaled joy
of living together in this fullness.

THE BOOK OF LOVE,
AS PRESERVED IN THE LIBRO ROSSO



I am not a poet.

And yet I have been blessed to live among the best of them. The greatest of the poets, the most gifted of the painters, the loveliest of women ... and the most magnificent of all men. Each has inspired me and there is a piece of the soul and essence of all of them in every image I paint.

I can only hope that my art will be remembered as a type of poetry, for I have tried to make each piece lyrical and full of texture and meaning. I have long struggled with the thought that perhaps it is against the artist's laws of conduct to reveal the inspirations, symbols, and layers beneath the works that we create. And yet Maestro Ficino has found evidence as old as ancient Egypt that such artist's codes were kept in secret diaries, so I will instead say that I am part of this timeless tradition.

As I am a humble member of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, all that I paint is done with the inspiration and glory of those divine teachings. They are intrinsic to every figure I paint; they infuse the colors, the textures, and the shape of my work. Every piece of my art, regardless of its patron or its worldly purpose, serves the teachings of the Way of Love. Every image is produced to communicate the truth.

In the pages that follow, I will reveal the secrets behind my work that they may one day be used as a teaching tool, for those with eyes to see.

So while I am not a poet, here is what I am: I am a painter. I am a pilgrim. I am a scribe.

Most of all, I am a servant of my Lord and my Lady, and of their Way of Love.

Our Master is fond of repeating the words of the first great Christian artist, the blessed Nicodemus, who said that "art will save the world." I pray that this is so, and I have endeavored to play some part, no matter how small, in that very worthy venture.

*I remain,
Alessandro di Filipepi*

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*New York City
present day*

MAUREEN PASCHAL had planned her schedule in New York City carefully. Having worked tirelessly in preparation for the release of her new book, she hoped to reward herself with a few blissful hours of recreation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art was her second-greatest passion, trumped only by history, which was why the books she authored were colored so richly by both. To spend even limited time in one of the world's great museums was a balm to her spirit.

Spring was alive in its most glorious form on this early March morning, rewarding her for making the rigorous walk along Central Park to the Met. Maureen loved New York. She decided to enjoy it to its fullest today, trying not to rush despite her crammed schedule. Walking up Fifth Avenue, she took a detour into Central Park. At the northern edge of the sailboat pond stood the enormous bronze sculpture from Lewis Carroll's masterpiece *Alice in Wonderland*. There was a whimsical magic and beauty to this piece of art that touched the eternal child in her. A larger-than-life Alice was depicted at her unbirthday party with her friends from Wonderland gathered around her. Quotes from the children's classic, the most beloved piece of literature from Maureen's childhood, surrounded the base of the sculpture. Walking the perimeter of Alice's party, she read the quotes from the book and from the poem "Jabberwocky." Her own favorite quote from the book, the one that Maureen displayed on a plaque over her computer at home, was not represented here.

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Like the White Queen, Maureen had learned to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. And now, with the arrival of Destino in her life, the number was often far more than that. Maureen mused on this, laughing a little at the sculpture as she stood in admiration of it. Her life had become something to rival Alice's most fantastic adventures. Here she was, a savvy and educated woman of the twenty-first century, about to embark upon a trip to Italy—to take lessons from a teacher who called himself Destino and who claimed to be immortal. And yet like Alice before her, she accepted this extraordinary character as an almost natural part of the strange landscape that her life had become.

Maureen allowed herself a few more precious minutes at the sculpture before heading back toward Fifth Avenue and the entrance to the

Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her time was limited at the Met, as she had to prepare for her book launch, so she would focus on one area of the museum and give that her full attention rather than try to see as much as possible.

After purchasing her ticket and attaching the Met button to her collar, she made the determination that today she would focus on the medieval gallery. Her research into the grand contessa, Matilda of Tuscany, had instilled within her a new fascination for the Middle Ages. Further, her prolonged excursions to France had given her a strong appreciation of Gothic art and architecture.

It was a sublime choice. She took her time, really giving each piece its due. She was particularly taken by the extraordinary wooden sculptures from Germany with their unequaled craftsmanship and delicacy. A number of the treasures reminded her of the life-changing experiences that had shaped her destiny while in France. Maureen sighed deeply her contentment, taking in the beauty of it all and enjoying the brief respite that art brought to her life.

As she entered the second large gallery, dominated by an enormous Gothic choir screen, something drew her attention to the far right of the room. While most of the artwork in this gallery was sculpture, one painting was displayed at the far right from the corridor entrance. Moving to get a closer look, Maureen gasped as she found herself standing, transfixed, before the most beautiful life-sized portrait of Mary Magdalene she had ever seen.

Notre Dame. Our Lady. My Lady. For Maureen, there was no escaping her. Not now, not ever.

Her eyes welled with tears, as they often did when confronted with a beautiful image of this extraordinary woman who had become her muse and master. As Maureen stood eye to eye with her, she realized quickly that this was no ordinary religious icon. This Magdalene sat enthroned, majestically beautiful in her crimson robe and flowing red-gold hair. In one hand she held the alabaster jar with which she was said to have anointed Jesus; the other, cradled in her lap, held a crucifix. She was surrounded by angels, trumpeting her glory. Moving closer, Maureen bent her knees to better view the lower portion of the painting. Kneeling at the Magdalene's feet were four men in pristine white robes. Hoods covered their heads completely, with only the narrowest slits where the eyes should be. There was something cultish and bizarre about their appearance. The kneeling figures were strange characters at best, sinister at worst.

Maureen could feel her heart racing and that strange sensation of heat around her temples that she had come to recognize when something pricked at her subconscious, something that should not and could not be ignored. This painting was important. Terribly important. She scanned her memory for any

mention of this work in her research, but none came. While writing her books she had become familiar with dozens of paintings of Mary Magdalene in the world's major museums. That such an important work could exist in the Met—and that she had never heard of it—was fascinating.

Maureen bent to read the title card. The picture was identified as “Spinello di Luca Spinelli—Processional Banner from the Confraternity of Saint Mary Magdalen.”

The official Met description, displayed to the side of the work, read

During the Middle Ages laymen often joined religious confraternities in which they met for devotions and performed charitable acts. Their hooded robes rendered such acts anonymous, in conformity with Christ's injunction that good works should not be done for vain praise. This extremely rare work was commissioned in about 1395 by the Confraternity of Saint Mary Magdalen in Borgo San Sepolcro and would have been carried in religious processions. It shows the members of the confraternity kneeling before their patron saint, who is serenaded by a choir of angels. Mary's ointment jar decorates the sleeves of their robes. The lightly drawn features of the face of Christ are modern. The original was removed and is now in the Vatican. The banner is otherwise remarkably well preserved.

Something was wrong with that description; Maureen could feel it instinctively. It was very clean, very pat, for a painting that looked and felt so mysterious. The hooded men surrounding their saint's feet weren't merely anonymous, they were downright unsettling. The hoods they wore seemed a most emphatic statement, as if it were a life-or-death matter that their identities be concealed. When she looked very closely, she saw that some of the men had openings in the back of their robes. Penitents. The openings were there so they could flog themselves and draw blood as part of their penance and to wash away their sins.

Maureen had always found the penitential practices of the Middle Ages disturbing. She was relatively sure that God did not want us to flog ourselves for his—or her—greater glory. And given her extensive study of Mary Magdalene, the Queen of Compassion and great teacher of love and forgiveness, she was certain that she would never have condoned such practices.

The composition of the painting made it all the more provocative, as it appeared to be an imitation of some of the more famous Holy Trinity images from the early Renaissance. These images depicted God the Father enthroned,

holding the crucifix in his hands and on his lap to represent the son. The Holy Spirit was usually present as a dove above the other images. This icon of Mary was painted in an identical way, only in this case she was the enthroned figure holding Jesus, denoting a place of extraordinary authority. Thus the hooded figures appeared to be worshipping Mary Magdalene on her throne as the Queen of Heaven, which would be a heretical concept even today. In the Middle Ages, such worship would likely have been punishable by death.

Then there was this curious phrase within the description: “The lightly drawn features of the face of Christ are modern. The original was removed and is now in the Vatican.” There was evidence of destruction to the banner: a patch covered the cut where the face of Christ had been on the crucifix, ostensibly the original piece that was surgically removed and taken to Rome in. But why? Why would anyone deface a rare and exquisitely beautiful painting by an Italian master?

If there was one thing Maureen had learned in her search for the truth about the secret aspects of Christian history, it was to never take anything at face value—and never trust the first and most obvious explanation, particularly in the symbolic world of art history. Removing her cell phone from her bag, she switched it to camera mode and photographed the painting in segments, storing them for future reference.

The digital readout on her phone was a harsh reminder that her time at the Met was coming to a close. Maureen slipped the phone back into her bag and stood before the painting in quiet appreciation. The questions that had run through her head so many times while following the clues left in religious art repeated themselves with resounding force.

What stories can you tell me, Lady? Who painted you like this and why? What did you really mean to those who carried this banner? And finally, the question that haunted Maureen every day of her life: What do you want from me now?

But today Mary Magdalene was silent, gazing back at her with quiet authority and an enigmatic expression that would have made Leonardo da Vinci weep with envy. The Mona Lisa had nothing on this Magdalene.

Maureen returned to the official description again and gasped. In the second reading, she caught this reference to the banner’s origins: “commissioned ... by the Confraternity of Saint Mary Magdalen in Borgo San Sepolcro.”

Borgo San Sepolcro. An easy translation from Italian. It meant the Place of the Holy Sepulcher.

Maureen glanced down at the ancient ring on her finger, the one from Jerusalem with the seal of Mary Magdalene. It was the symbol of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher—the Order that gave Matilda to the world, the Order in which the purest teachings of Jesus and the Book of Love were preserved, and the Order of which Destino was the Master—and into which she was about to be indoctrinated. Was it possible that there was an entire town in Italy devoted to the Order of the Holy Sepulcher with Mary Magdalene at its center?

Maureen had often described her research and writing as similar to the process of creating a collage. There were many different little pieces of evidence, which individually didn't amount to much. But when you began to arrange the pieces together, see how they all could fit, which complemented the other, then you began to develop something beautiful and whole. And here was what appeared to be a central piece of the stunning mosaic Maureen was crafting.

She looked around at the visitors wandering the gallery. Only a few passed by to give the processional banner a cursory glance before continuing on. Part of her wanted to scream at them: *Don't you see this? Do you have any idea that this painting may hold one of the keys to history and you're walking right past it?*

But she wasn't sure of that yet. Where was Borgo San Sepolcro? What other attachments did this artist, Spinello, have that might connect him and this masterpiece to the heretical cultures of medieval Italy? After doing her own due diligence, she would call the experts in France and Italy to get their take on it. Beginning, of course, with Bérenger.

After all these weeks apart, the thought of Bérenger Sinclair suffused her body with warmth. Maureen missed him so much. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to get lost in that rich, delicious sense of remembering the last time they were together. She sighed heavily and then shook it off. There were new discoveries looming here, and sharing them with him would make them that much sweeter.

She bid farewell to the artistic glories of the medieval gallery and made her way to the front of the museum, stopping briefly in the gift shop to see if there was a postcard of the fantastic Magdalene banner. There was not even a mention of the rare work in the Met visitor's guide. Searching through a vast assortment of art books, she found one that contained a brief mention of the banner's artist, referring to him as Spinello Aretino. The passage explained that "Aretino" indicated that he was from the town of Arezzo. In Tuscany.

Tuscany. If there was one place Maureen was certain was rife with

heretical secrets in the early Middle Ages, it was Tuscany. She smiled, knowing it was not a coincidence that she was currently in possession of a plane ticket to Florence and the following week would be on her way to the heart of the heresy.



Nothing.

There was nothing on the Internet about the rare and wonderful Magdalene banner at the Met. Even on the Met's own website it took a concerted effort to find information, and there was nothing other than the description Maureen had read earlier at the museum.

Two hours of searching through Magdalene art pages were fruitless. No amount of googling brought up anything new on the piece itself, so Maureen went after it from a different angle, looking up other details from the description: the artist, the locales. She found some general information online about the artist and also on Borgo San Sepolcro that might prove helpful later. She made the following notes:

SPINELLO ARETINO—given name Luca (Luke), as was his father's, also a painter, after the saint for whom the painter's guild was named. The name "Aretino" means "from Arezzo," which is a province in Tuscany. Primarily a fresco painter, he worked in Florence at Santa Trinità.

Maureen paused. Spinello painted at the church in Santa Trinità, which was a sacred location for the Order of the Holy Sepulcher and had been one of Matilda's strongholds. This was a good sign that she was on the right track. Her mosaic was beginning to take shape. She read on.

BORGO SAN SEPOLCRO—now known as Sansepolcro, it was founded in the year 1000 by pilgrims who had returned from the Holy Land with specific reverence for the Holy Sepulcher and with priceless relics. One of these pilgrims was known as Santo Arcano. It is in the province of Arezzo and is the birthplace of the master fresco painter Piero della Francesca.

Maureen squirmed with pleasure at this discovery. She was right! There was an entire town in Tuscany dedicated to the Holy Sepulcher. But there was one sentence that gave her a more immediate rush of excitement:

One of these pilgrims was known as Santo Arcano.

Santo Arcano. Maureen laughed out loud. It appeared here that the Church

was saying that there was a saint named Arcano. Her Latin wasn't fluent, but it was serviceable, and she had certainly used it to read between the lines many times in her research. Santo Arcano was not a reference to an obscure Tuscan saint. It meant "Holy Secret." If she were to translate all this into English and make sense of it, what the description really said to Maureen was, *This town, named after the Holy Sepulcher, was established based on the Holy Secret!*

Now she was getting somewhere.

She contemplated the rest of this discovery for a moment and made notes. Maureen was familiar with the work of Piero della Francesca, as his iconic Magdalene was among her favorites. He had painted her for the duomo in Arezzo, a very strong and majestic image from which her power and leadership emanated. There was nothing penitent about this Magdalene. It was not painted by a man who believed for one minute the sixth-century propaganda of Mary Magdalene as repentant sinner. It was a fresco created to emphasize leadership. Maureen had a framed copy of this image hanging in her office. She had studied Piero della Francesca during her art research and always found him interesting. His frescoes in Arezzo were very alive, very human and full of narrative. When she looked at his art, she felt kinship with him; Piero was a storyteller. He painted *The Legend of the True Cross* in rich and elaborate detail, he infused *The Coming of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* with profound sanctity, and all his artwork represented the most sacred teachings of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher.

Reading about the Order reminded Maureen that she needed to make arrangements for her return to Europe, as she had meetings with her French publisher in Paris to prepare for the release there. Paris was never a hardship; she loved the city and her best friend, Tamara Wisdom, an independent filmmaker, had been hounding her to spend some time there with her. Maureen's cousin and spiritual adviser, Peter Healy, was also living in Paris at the moment. He had once been known as Father Peter Healy, but he was a refugee from the Vatican at the moment, possibly forever, and was no longer referring to himself as a priest or wearing his collar. Maureen was anxious to catch up with him.

She decided she would fly into Paris, do her business there, then drive down with Tammy to where both of their beloveds awaited them at Bérenger's Château des Pommes Bleues in the southwest of France. Tammy was also blissfully in love, engaged to the gentle Languedoc giant Roland Gelis, who was the childhood best friend of Bérenger. They all lived together in the beauty of the Aude river valley, a magical part of the Languedoc region where the château was located, just outside of Arques. Bérenger, the heir to a

Scottish oil fortune, had inherited the château from his grandfather. It had been built in the Languedoc as the exclusive headquarters of a secret society that protected dangerous and heretical secrets. Bérenger had inherited these secrets along with his French castle.

It was too late to call Bérenger tonight, but first thing in the morning—her morning, his afternoon—she would talk to him about accompanying her from Arques to Florence. Destino sent her a letter advising them that he was leaving Chartres to return to Florence, stating it was “once and for all.” The letter had felt very final, as if he were preparing to die in Italy. It had upset Maureen immensely at the time. Destino was ancient—literally—and his death was inevitable. But to lose such a treasure, now that she understood and accepted what he was and the extraordinary wisdom he had to offer the world, would be hard to take.

Destino’s letter indicated that he had much to teach Maureen in a limited time and that it would be her responsibility to be conversant in the Libro Rosso prior to her arrival. He did not have time to teach the basics of the Order’s tenets. He had very specific lessons for them and tasks that must be carried out in preparation for the mission they would all embark upon together. Destino was emphatic when referring to “the mission.”

In preparation for her trip to Florence, Maureen reaffirmed her commitment to study the teachings of the Libro Rosso, which she currently had in her possession, as Destino had given all of them a translation as a gift: Maureen, Bérenger, Tammy, Roland, and Peter were all currently studying the English translation of the sacred red book that held the greatest secrets of Christianity.

She had used these sacred pages to craft *The Time Returns: The Legend of the Book of Love*. But it was time to study them and commit certain passages to memory. Maureen pledged to start from the beginning and work all the way through, studying a few segments a night.

It wasn’t a chore. Maureen had thought from the first moment she had been exposed to the Libro Rosso teachings that they were the most beautiful words she had ever read. She recognized them as truth, and it had been a celebration for her to write a book about the brave souls who risked everything to preserve these astonishing teachings for two thousand years.

Maureen settled into bed with her book. The teachings always returned to the understanding of love as the great gift given to us by God. But as simple as such an idea should be, it was here that the controversy began. For within the Book of Love, God was not viewed as a patriarch; he was not simply Our Father. God was Our Father in perfect union with Our Mother. The first pages

contained Maureen's favorite passage:



In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. But God was not a single being, he did not reign over the universe alone. He ruled with his companion, who was his beloved.

And thus in the first book of Moses, called Genesis, God said, "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness," as he is speaking to his other half, who is his wife. For creation is a miracle that occurs most perfectly when the union of male and female principles is present. And the Lord God said, "Behold that man has become one of Us."

And the book of Moses says, thus God created man in his own image, male and female created he them.

How could God create female in his own image if he did not have a female image? But this he did, and she was called Athiret. Later Athiret became known to the Hebrews as Asherah, our heavenly mother, and the Lord became known as El, our heavenly father.

And so it was that El and Asherah desired to experience their great and divine love in a physical form and to share such blessedness with the children they would create. Each soul who was formed was perfectly matched, given a twin made from the same essence. In the book called Genesis, this is told as Adam's twin being created from his rib, which is to say his own essence, as she is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, spirit of his spirit.

Then God said, "And they shall become as one flesh."

Thus the hieros-gamos was created, the sacred marriage of trust and consciousness that unites the beloveds into one flesh. This is our highest gift from our father and mother in heaven. For when we come together in the bridal chamber, we find the divine union that El and Asherah wished for all their earthly children to experience in the light of pure joy and the essence of true love.

For those with ears to hear, let them hear it.

EL AND ASHERAH, AND THE HOLY ORIGINS OF HIEROS-GAMOS,
FROM THE BOOK OF LOVE AS PRESERVED IN THE LIBRO ROSSO

Since meeting Bérenger, Maureen had become committed to understanding and experiencing the *hieros-gamos* in all its forms. Her eyes had been opened to a kind of love that she had previously never realized could exist outside fairy tales and legends. But this kind of epic union, this all-encompassing, nurturing love, was possible. If Maureen could experience

it, be transformed by it, then she was certain that everyone could. She and Bérenger realized that this was part of their destiny: to help others find love as they had been blessed to find it themselves.

Maureen closed the book, content to sleep with visions of El and Asherah dancing in her dreams.



Maureen's dreams did not obey her desires.

Her dreaming was usually lucid and clear; complete sequences and coherent images came to her unbidden in her sleep. Always, they contained important messages for her or provided urgent clues to be followed. Until tonight. This dream was chaotic, frenetic, with flashes of image, sound, and emotion, moving through time and space. Some of the images seemed to relate to each other; others did not. But there was one constant factor through the entire dream. No matter the image, no matter the time frame, each flash of vision contained one unifying element.



Fire.

The fire burned hot in the town square, the pitch that had been poured upon the kindling to make it ignite faster and burn hotter was effective. Hundreds of people surrounded the stake and its victim. Or victims? Sweat poured down the faces of onlookers as hell appeared to rage before them. In one flash the crowd was weeping, in another jeering. Two different fires. Two different cities. One, then another, then back again. In the first city, she saw the faces in the crowd. They were shocked, terrified, saddened. She did not see the victim, only the flames, which leaped high in the center of the square, enveloping in their terrible embrace what was once a human being. Maureen saw the faces of weeping men and women in the crowd, and one man in particular came into focus for her. He was dressed plainly enough, as a merchant perhaps, but there was something in his demeanor that marked him as different. He stood tall, and despite his obvious distress he had the presence of a king. As she watched a single tear roll down his cheek, she felt the man's terrible grief—and guilt—over the tragedy unfolding before him. Then another bright flash of fire moved her attention away from the man and back to the space where the stake had been. But it wasn't flame she saw now; rather it was a blinding white light that burst into the sky and rose to heaven. The sky appeared to darken all around them, turning nearly to black, as the white light against it took form for the briefest instant before fading away.

Maureen was then plunged into the fire of another city, another time, and another victim.

The faces in this crowd were angry, in contrast to the previous vision. And they all belonged to men, at least it was only men who were immediately surrounding the scaffolding. These men were the source of the jeering she had heard when the dream began. The riled mob threw things into the fire, objects Maureen could not identify, shouting in anger as they did so. A strange word she did not recognize, chanted over and over again. For a moment she thought they were saying "pig nose," but it seemed absurd to her, even in the surreal dream state. Again, she could not see the victim as the flames here burned even higher than in the first vision. But the atmosphere in this city was markedly different. This victim was despised and those who turned out for the execution were determined to watch the hated one die in this terrible way. This was controlled chaos, but it appeared to be on the verge of getting out of control as the flames grew hotter and higher. Just as Maureen felt the images start to fade, began to feel her consciousness calling her out of the dream state, she had one last vision of the final, terrible execution. At the edge of the square, far enough away to be safe but close enough to be scarred forever by what she was witnessing, was a little girl. Her dark eyes were enormous as she watched the fire and the angry mob that surrounded it. She was a fine-boned little thing like a tiny bird, no more than five or six, and desperately undernourished. And yet for all her fragile physical appearance, this child did not appear weakened or even afraid. It was the look in the little girl's eyes that Maureen would be left with long after the dream was over, as there was nothing of fear in them. Her eyes reflected the flames before her, and in them Maureen saw something she could not quite identify, yet she knew that it was something she did not like.

In the child's eyes was something terrible, something not so far away from madness.

*Confraternity of the Holy Apparition
Vatican City
present day*

"YOU ALLOWED THIS to happen!"

Felicity de Pazzi hissed at her granduncle as she threw the book across the desk at him. Her heavy black eyebrows were a harsh frame to huge dark eyes, which flashed with the heat of anger in her narrow face. She didn't care that he was old, ill, and feeble. He was supposed to stand for something. And he had failed, failed miserably when they needed him most.

"Calm yourself, my dear." Father Girolamo de Pazzi held up one

trembling, palsied hand in an effort to reach his outraged niece. He loved her like a daughter and had played a strong role in raising her to be the power behind the confraternity now that he was no longer physically able to deal with day-to-day operations. Her unbridled passion for their cause made her an unstoppable and infinitely holy force. It also gave her an extreme temper. She had been well named, as inspired by God. Her mother had had a dream of the great Saint Felicita while pregnant with this, her only daughter. Throughout her pregnancy she had had further visions of that blessed saint who had been brave enough to sacrifice all seven of her sons to prove her unwavering faith. It was clear to everyone in the de Pazzi family when this child was born on the tenth of July, the feast day of Santa Felicita, that she had brought her name and her identity with her.

At boarding school in Great Britain, she adopted the English version of the name, Felicity. It had stayed with her, even after she was expelled from several British establishments for “aberrant behavior.” While in her early teens, she had begun to have visions that possessed her totally, events that proved deeply problematic for the British schools. She was brought back to Rome and placed in a convent school where her progress could be monitored by those closer to her family and faith. When it was determined that she was indeed seeing authentic apparitions, the confraternity adopted her as their living patron saint. Felicity had become a prophetess in her own right, a visionary who fell to the ground in ecstasy, writhing as she was struck by visions of Jesus Christ and his most Holy Virgin Mother. The fanaticism around Felicity and her visions had grown through the ultraconservative movement over the last two years, and she had begun to develop stigmata as the visions descended. Attendance at the confraternity meetings when Felicity was featured had become standing room only as a result. To watch her as the visions possessed her was eerie, yet powerful. There would be one such meeting tonight at the confraternity meeting hall, and she intended to make her appearance count.

Father Girolamo de Pazzi had given the girl a plaque as a gift upon her return to Italy, something she could use to bolster her strength while she made the transition to the harsher convent environment that would ultimately prove nurturing for her. The plaque was made of wood, inscribed with a quote from the blessed Saint Augustine regarding the sanctified actions of Saint Felicita. It was a quote that the modern Felicity had not only memorized but taken to heart as her model for faith. She would use it tonight during her appearance.

Wonderful is the sight set before the eyes of our faith, a mother choosing for her children to finish their earthly lives before her, contrary to all our human instincts. She did not send her sons away,

she sent them on to God. She understood that they were beginning life, not ending it. It was not enough that she looked on, but she encouraged them. She bore more fruit with her courage than with her womb. Seeing them be strong, she was strong; and in the victory of each of her children, she was victorious.

To the de Pazzi family, Santa Felicita was an extraordinary woman of faith, possibly the greatest of all Christian martyrs when the total of her sacrifice was taken into account. This faith in the saint's righteousness was shared with an unequaled passion by the younger Felicity. In all his eighty-plus years of life devoted to the Church, Girolamo de Pazzi had never met anyone with the religious fervor of the woman who stood before him. She was shaking with it now, unable to control her self-righteous anger over the offending book that had brought her to this confrontation. He pleaded for her understanding.

"What could I have done to stop it? It was ... out of my control, Felicity."

The book sat between them on the desk, a silent enemy. *The Time Returns*, by Maureen Paschal. *The Legend of the Book of Love*.

"You could have stopped her while you had her there."

Girolamo de Pazzi shook his head. He knew when she said, "You could have stopped her," she really meant that he should have killed her. There was a time when he would have been prepared to give that order. But he had discovered that he could not take a life in the presence of the Book of Love, and certainly not *that* life. Not after he had seen the book opened and realized definitively what it was. What *she* was.

What he had witnessed that evening in the crypt of Chartres Cathedral was not something he could readily describe to his grandniece, or to anyone else. He had lured Maureen Paschal into the crypt, sure enough, to bring her into the presence of the Book of Love, the ultimate treasure of anyone who revered the name of Jesus Christ. It was a gospel written in his own hand and yet one which could not be simply read by scholars and theologians, many of whom had tried over the nearly five centuries that it had resided secretly within the Vatican walls. It was written in a polyglot of languages and there were layers to it, encoded teachings that average humans and traditional Christians had long forgotten how to access. The book was "locked," and as such was a mystical treasure that required a unique key to unveil all the teachings within it.

That key was Maureen Paschal.

It was apparent to everyone in the Confraternity of the Holy Apparition

that Maureen Paschal was a prophetess with extraordinary ability and clarity. They had all studied how she had found the Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene by following her visions, a feat no one else could accomplish. Even within their confraternity, where they had cultivated the greatest visionaries of all time for almost eight centuries, no one had been able to track that treasure successfully. Once she made her discovery in France, it became infinitely clear that Maureen Paschal had a special destiny. Then they knew that she was the “Expected One” who would also be able to unlock the secrets within the Book of Love. This infuriated Felicity de Pazzi.

Felicity had been brought into the presence of the Book of Love on several occasions, and each time the confraternity members prayed fervently that she would be able to unlock the Book and reveal its contents to them. But the book remained silent, despite Felicity’s stigmata, which bled so profusely when in the presence of the Book that she had to be hospitalized after the last session.

Felicity de Pazzi had suffered and bled for *all* her visions. This is how she knew they were authentic. God required pain from his holy ones to test their faith. Anyone who claimed visions but did not suffer for them was a false prophet who had not been tested. Felicity lived to share this understanding with others. Her mission was to tell the truth of the terrible prophecies that were given her about the End Times and the sinners who would be boiled alive in their own blood if they did not repent. The Holy Mother was very specific about the nature of the death that would come to the unbelievers and to those who were not willing to make profound sacrifices to show their love of God.

And Felicity did indeed sacrifice. She wore a *cilicium*, the medieval-style hair shirt that scratched and tore the flesh, beneath her loose-fitting clothes. She was remarkably thin and fine-boned, and she tied the instrument of torture tightly against her skin so that it did not show beneath her blouses. Felicity wore long sleeves at all times, so the scars from her cuttings were not visible. She had been taking a blade to her own flesh since she was in her early teens, carving images of crosses, thorns, and nails into her arms and legs until they bled and scabbed. Felicity knew that pain, suffering, and ultimately martyrdom were the greatest gifts one could give to God, and she could therefore not abide the knowledge of Maureen Paschal’s continued grace as a visionary. That woman was an aberration, a heretic and blasphemer who did not deserve the gifts that God had bestowed upon her. She abused them for her own personal gain, exploiting her faith for money and profit. She was worse than the Whore of Babylon, more wicked than Jezebel; she was the serpent Lilith who would destroy Eden.

Maureen Paschal had to be stopped. And if she could be—if the unworthy life of such a demoness could be successfully terminated—then perhaps Felicity would finally be able to fulfill her own destiny. It was clear to her that the Paschal whore had stolen her rightful place. If God would only allow one prophetess at a time to unlock the Book of Love, then eliminating this unworthy one was a necessity. As long as Maureen Paschal lived, the role was taken. But if she died, Felicity would then be able to step into that place, which was rightfully hers.

Felicity continued to rant. “She was the only one who could unlock the Book of Love, and you brought her there to do it. To prove once and for all that it was not what the heretics claimed it to be. And then ... put an end to her.”

The old man found some strength in the truth as he pulled himself up in his chair. “But it *is* what the heretics claim it to be, my dear. It is everything we feared it could be, and more. And that, unfortunately, is our predicament.”

“All the more reason to end her.”

“Felicity, God has chosen her. Whether we like it or not, whether we understand his reasons, it does not matter. If God has chosen her, we must accept that.”

“You have lost all your wits along with your faith, Uncle!” Felicity looked as if she would strike him, and the old man recoiled as she leaned across the desk to make her point. “Don’t you see? It is a test for me. God is waiting for me to show that I am worthy of this place by eliminating the imposter, the usurper. This is a great treasure, to be his prophetess, to speak his truth as it is told to me by the Holy Virgin. Such truths cannot come through the corrupted channels of a fornicator. It is through my chastity and my suffering that the truth will be revealed, and we will save the sinners who would repent. And the unrepentant will die and be condemned to hell, as they must.”

Father Girolamo looked at his niece helplessly. He had attempted to explain the events in Chartres to her, but she did not care to listen. The leaders of the confraternity had known that Maureen would never cooperate with what was considered a radical fringe element within the Church—or more accurately, just outside the Church. This was why she had been lured into the crypt of Chartres Cathedral on false pretenses. The plan was to offer her a deal, to persuade her through financial and other means to come to their side and work for the confraternity. They wanted Maureen to recant, to turn her back on her research and deny her discovery of the importance of Mary Magdalene. Maureen had published her findings to a fascinated audience of millions, claiming as she did that Magdalene was not only the wife of Jesus

but also his chosen successor and arguably the founder of Christianity following the crucifixion. Truly, Mary Magdalene was the apostle of the apostles, but to allow her such power—with evidence to support the claim—would diminish the authority of the Church. Maureen’s work challenged many long and deeply held traditions in Catholicism, including the refusal to allow women to become priests. But perhaps most controversial of all was Maureen’s assertion that sacred sexuality was not only practiced by Jesus and his lawfully wedded wife but that this tradition, known as *hieros-gamos*, was a cornerstone of early Christianity. For an institution that had required vows of celibacy from its clergy for a thousand years, this idea of sex as sacred and holy was completely offensive, if not blasphemous.

The confraternity was not going to allow an American upstart—and a female at that—to challenge their traditions without a fight. Deciding that the most effective course would be to get the heretic herself to recant, they set into motion their plan to entrap Maureen and to blackmail her into changing her story. They knew it was a long shot and were prepared to eliminate her if she did not comply with the terms.

But that was before Maureen Paschal was brought into the presence of the Book of Love, in the holy ground of the Chartres crypt on the summer solstice. That was before the book opened and revealed itself, surrounding Father Girolamo in the most exquisite blue light, infusing him with the perfect expression of love, a physical experience of what God felt like on earth. That was before Girolamo de Pazzi came to realize that the Book of Love was the true message of his Lord, and that to destroy the one woman who understood what it was and what it said would be a sin too great for him to commit.

“But why did you allow her to leave to tell this tale?” She gestured contemptuously at the book that lay between them. “*That*, Uncle, was not the plan. There is not a man—or woman—in the five hundred years of our people who has been as weak as you were in that moment. After all this time ... *ahhh!*” She screamed her frustration, unable to put the words together through her rage. “It is inconceivable! And now look what she has done! Her blasphemy infects the world, and you along with it.”

It was a cruel blow. Father Girolamo de Pazzi had to be carried out of the Chartres crypt on a stretcher after his encounter with Maureen Paschal and the Book of Love. That same night, he suffered a stroke from which he had been recovering for two years. His speech had returned, but he was feeble and partially paralyzed as a result of the ailment. He had no doubt that the stroke was God’s punishment, his way of warning Girolamo that there must be no further attacks on Maureen’s life. He had tried to explain this to Felicity and the other more rabid members of the confraternity, but his

reasoning fell on the deaf ears of fanatics who appeared to be growing more rabid rather than less.

There had been two other members of the confraternity with him that night in the crypt, henchmen of the darkest order who had been chosen for their extremism. Both men were committed fanatics, like Felicity, and had been fully prepared to eliminate Maureen if necessary to protect the secrets of the Church—once they were certain of what those secrets were. But they, too, were changed by the events of that evening. The crueller of them had died in his sleep within a week of the events. His heart merely stopped beating in his chest, despite his youth and physical health. The other man lived still, but he had simply ceased to function and had not uttered a word in two years. He was currently residing in an institution for the mentally handicapped in Switzerland.

No, those who were not present would never comprehend what happened that evening.

“You cannot understand, Felicity. But I beg you to leave this alone. It is ... far bigger than you can imagine. And I fear for you, fear that you will be the one hurt if you attempt to harm the Paschal woman in any way. God does not wish her to be harmed.”

Felicity spat at her uncle, dark eyes glazing over as she channeled the holy Felicita’s ire. There were moments when the saint appeared to take possession of her namesake and speak through her with an unearthly fervor, as she did now.

“How dare you presume to tell me what God wants?” the ancient Felicita growled through her vessel at the cowering old man before her. “I hear him clearly. And I pray that God forgives you for your weakness and for your evil intent. Only a devil would try to stop me from carrying out an ultimate example of sacrifice for the extreme glory of our Lord!”

Father Girolamo de Pazzi sat back in his chair, exhausted and deflated by the encounter. His niece appeared to have taken possession of her own body once more, though her eyes were still feverish. Felicity grabbed the offending book from his desk and turned to storm out as he called out weakly after her.

“What will you do now, Felicity?”

She turned to face him one final time, a small, satisfied smile on her lips.

“I have an appearance tonight, Uncle. Don’t tell me you are so feeble you have forgotten. And I have no doubt that Our Lady will have much to say about this fornicator who would commit blasphemy in the name of her chaste and holy son.” Felicita spat on the book she held in her hand. “And so I shall

ensure that the confraternity knows full well who the enemy is.”

He nodded sadly, knowing there was nothing he could do to stop what was about to happen.

“And then? Where will you go then?”

“Florence.”

“Why Florence?”

“Savonarola,” she said first, knowing he would understand that. Her uncle had been named after their infamous ancestor, after all. His full given name was Girolamo Savonarola de Pazzi. It was a name that, until his grand failure of two years ago, he had lived up to brilliantly.

“And because Destino is there.” She hissed his name with a venom that she normally saved for her red-haired American nemesis. Destino had been the enemy of the confraternity for centuries, and she had a special desire to stop him as well. However, putting an end to the Paschal creature once and for all would be the greatest blow to Destino, so that remained her primary focus. Eliminating Maureen would destroy everything Destino had ever hoped to build.

And as Felicity turned and stomped out without a glance back, Father Girolamo watched her leave with more trepidation than he had ever felt in his long and troubled life.

Someone would soon die. He had no doubt of that. He just wasn’t entirely sure who it would be—or at this stage, who he wished it to be.

*The villa of Careggi, outskirts of Florence
July 4, 1442*

COSIMO DE’ MEDICI paced in anticipation of the arrival of his esteemed guest. The coming of René d’ Anjou to Florence was an affair of state, and the members of that republic’s council, the Signoria, had been preparing for months. There were political preparations to be sure: René was extremely popular in France, where he held a number of exalted titles, each bearing witness to the tremendous power he could wield when necessary. He was the duke of Provence and the titular king of both Naples and Jerusalem—all territories that would be very valuable to have in alliance should the Florentine republic require foreign aid in times of crisis. The military power of Naples, specifically, was of utmost importance in Italian alliances.

Yet for all his benevolent reputation, and that he was known as “Good King René,” those were honors bestowed by his French countrymen. Florentines were, by nature, skeptical of all outsiders, but they were

particularly wary of the acquisitive hands of French nobility. The fact that Naples was in French hands was grating enough on many Italians, and yet Florentines also realized that it could have been worse: the more politically aggressive and spiritually restrictive Aragon family from Spain was also vying for control of Naples. At least King René was a charming young man of education, taste, and progressive humanist ideals, all qualities that the cultured people of Florence held in high regard. Still, handling the multititled nobleman would require expert diplomacy and negotiating tactics.

The political potentials and detriments of an alliance with Good King René were argued in the Signoria at the same time that the coffers were opened to create a lavish spectacle of welcome worthy of the Republic of Florence. Cosimo de' Medici observed all of it but did little to participate in the public and political machinations. He was the most powerful and influential man in the Republic of Florence, but his interest in René d'Anjou was entirely personal—and gravely secret. Regardless of the outcome of the grand political posturing that would occur over the next weeks, Cosimo knew that René would never fail him if he ever truly needed him. Their meeting today in the privacy of the Medici villa of Careggi, beyond the watchful eyes that lurked within the city walls, would attest to that. While King René's official entrance and reception into Florence would occur ten days later, he had entered the region today under heavy disguise on a secret mission. It was a visit that was completely unknown to the citizens of Florence, a meeting that would have no witnesses save the chosen few and the ancient stones that formed the walls of Cosimo's elegant retreat.



“Cousin! It is a joy to reunite with you.” The high-ranking French nobleman, known for his warmth, embraced Cosimo heartily once the door was safely closed behind them.

Cosimo smiled broadly at René's use of the familial greeting, and returned it. “The joy is all mine, cousin. Thank you for coming.”

Any Florentine observing this meeting would have been deeply perplexed. René d'Anjou carried the highest royal French pedigree; he was the son of the two most pristine royal bloodlines in Europe, the French Angevin dynasty and the Spanish Aragonese, and the holder of multiple hereditary titles. Conversely, Cosimo de' Medici was a commoner, one of the most wealthy and influential commoners in all Europe, but from a merchant class all the same. How a prince of these exalted and elitist dynasties came to call the Italian banker his cousin was a secret worth more than gold, a secret of life

and death for all involved.

René recounted his recent journey as Cosimo ushered him into the elegant *studiolo*. The doors to his private library were opened only to the most intimate and trusted friends and family members. As was traditional in many wealthy Florentine families, even wives were not allowed within the walls of their husband's private studios. Cosimo had kept this tradition, even through his long marriage to a woman he loved, and his secrets were well contained within these walls.

"I have just come from Sansepolcro. I am told that you have secured that territory completely?"

Cosimo nodded. He had purchased Borgo Sansepolcro to add it to Florentine territories in Tuscany, yet he had used private Medici money to do so. This was not merely a strategic political purchase for Florence. It was a personal one. The medieval walled city, established in the tenth century, was sacred ground for the Medici as it had been the dwelling place of the Magi for five hundred years.

"How is our beloved Master? Is he on his way?" Cosimo asked.

"Fra Francesco is well and is not so far behind me. It is astonishing to see that he has not changed a bit since I was a boy."

Cosimo smiled knowingly before replying; the crooked smile transformed his often serious and sardonic face to a landscape where wit and understanding shared space. Memories of their Master and the sacred time spent with him always made him smile. The old man known as Fra Francesco had taught both of these men and instilled in them the understanding that they were cousins of a very ancient blood and spirit. Fra Francesco was entirely unique. He was the gentle yet formidable Master of an ancient society to which both men had pledged fealty until death, the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. The Order and its teachings were firmly ensconced just a day's ride from Florence in the tiny walled city that shared its name and was now a Medici possession: Sansepolcro.

"I dare say he will never change, as you well know," Cosimo responded. "But I am grateful that you have agreed to come on this, the specified date. There is much to discuss, and to plan for."

"How could I refuse? This date is written in the stars, and we must ensure that we honor it appropriately. It is a matter of great excitement for everyone in the Order, and I will do my duty as it has been decided. When is this child destined to arrive?"

"We have assembled all the forecasts from the Magi, with Fra Francesco's

counsel. They all agree that the stars clearly indicate 1449 because of the positioning of Mars in Pisces that occurs that year. If properly timed, he will be born on the first day of January, so he can then be baptized five days later on the Feast of the Epiphany. It will require great planning, but as you know, it has been done before with success. And this time ... we must succeed exactly. Such a birth will give him the stellar influences that satisfy the prophecy most completely. This is why we must begin preparation now, far in advance, to ensure our success. It may take several years to find the perfect woman to mother this child.”

No one knew the power of this ancient foretelling more personally than René d’Anjou. He was the reigning Poet Prince, the golden child recognized by the Order for his divine birth and destiny. His path had been predetermined by his bloodline and birth date, and he had done his best to fulfill it. Cosimo’s reference to “succeeding exactly this time” caused René to flinch a little. It was a reference to his own birth, which had missed the timing when he arrived two weeks too late. While the position of the stars at René’s birth was still in keeping with the prophecy, he had known from his earliest days that he would always be a bit of a disappointment. Yes, he was a Poet Prince. But he was not *the* Poet Prince. And this unfortunate aspect of his birth haunted him each time he made an error or was seen to fall short in his duties to the Order and their divine mission.

René closed his eyes and recited the prophecy of the Poet Prince, which had colored his life in shades of extreme light and dark since his own birth had been predicted by the Magi:

*The Son of Man shall choose
when the time returns for the Poet Prince.
He who is a spirit of earth and water born
within the complex realm of the sea goat
and the bloodline of the blessed.
He who will submerge the influence of Mars
And exalt the influence of Venus
To embody grace over aggression.
He will inspire the hearts and minds of the people
So as to illuminate the path of service
And show them the Way.
This is his legacy,
This, and to know a very great love.*

Good King René looked up at his old friend with eyes that blurred with tears. “As you know, I have not been the most perfect prince. I have indeed been blessed to know a very great love, I have fathered an

equinox-born daughter who fulfills a prophecy of her own, and I have tried to complete all the tasks set out for me to benefit the Order and preserve our ways. But I will admit it does not grieve me to relinquish the title. I shall sleep better once this boy is born, and born perfectly to the plan set forth by God through the schedule of the stars. Perhaps I shall sleep once and for all.”

“Do not speak so, René,” the elder Cosimo chided. “You are such a young man. There is much greatness awaiting you in this life.”

King René d’Anjou had come to Florence at the request of Fra Francesco, known by the exalted title of Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, to surrender his title as the reigning Poet Prince in preparation for the baby whose coming was now foretold. The date of this meeting had been carefully calculated by the astrologers within the Order, who were known as the Magi in honor of the three priest-kings who foresaw the birth of Jesus. Indeed, the legacy of the Magi spanned the fifteen hundred years since the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem. These modern Magi were highly educated in the way of the ancients, conversant in teachings from Zoroaster and the Kabbalah, and were experts in the study of the Sybilline Oracles. They were masters of Egyptian mysticism, Chaldean numerology, and above all, the workings of the planets on the fortunes of mankind. The Magi understood that astrology was a gift from God, meant to be a scepter of power when enhanced by the intellect, spirit, and free will of those who were enlightened enough to utilize it properly. It was the ultimate tool that could be used to accomplish the will of God.

The current Magi were on constant watch for the special children who had been predicted in this generation. In the Order, “The time returns” was the ancient motto that they lived by, and the stars indicated that the coming decades would bring together the most significantly gifted and divinely blessed men and women. There were specific cycles of greatness in history, eras which were predetermined by God, through the stars, to bring forth angelic and evolved souls to improve the state of mankind. The Magi, along with the elders of the Order, were not content to leave all this to chance—nor had they ever been. Through the careful use of astrology they could ensure that certain children were conceived at the appropriate time and in the immaculate way that would dictate divine blessings in birth and through life. With specific guidance and wisdom, this new generation would create a golden age, a rebirth of mankind that would combine ancient wisdom with progressive thought to catapult humanity into a shining time of peace and prosperity. It was a divine vision of unity, of a time when all men and women would understand what it meant to be *anthropos*—fully realized and fulfilled humans—as defined in the Order’s most sacred text, the Libro Rosso.

The Libro Rosso, the great red book, was a protected text passed down through the Order. It contained within it a perfect copy of the stunning lost gospel written by Jesus, referred to as the Book of Love. Legend within the Order told that Jesus left this priceless document to Mary Magdalene so that she might teach his words from it after he was gone. While the original gospel written in the hand of the Lord himself had disappeared to history, a perfect copy was made by the apostle Philip in the presence of the first book. That copy was now bound within the gilded leather cover of the Libro Rosso. Also in the sacred red book was a history of the Order, including lives of the saints, many of whom were not recognized by the traditional Church, and others with very different stories to tell than those which were now “accepted” by Rome. Finally, the book contained a series of prophecies, including that of the Poet Prince. The Libro Rosso had been in the possession of French royalty for centuries and was now kept by Good King René as the reigning heir to the prophecy.

René ran his hands through his hair as he settled back in one of Cosimo’s plush velvet-covered chairs. He sighed heavily before continuing. “Ah, this child, this child ... you must know that it is a curse as much as it is a blessing, Cosimo. It is ... not an easy thing to live with this prophecy. And yet for those of us who do, we must remember at all times that we were chosen for it by God. It is a responsibility that we can never, never lose sight of.”

The portents showed that the next child to fulfill the prophecy, the Poet Prince who would usher in this new era of enlightenment, was destined to be the child of Cosimo’s oldest son, Piero. Their focus now would be to choose the appropriate “Mary” to wed to Piero, to carry the child and to raise him properly in preparation for his destiny.

“This grandchild of yours must be taught carefully, by our Master, in the same way that we were—only with even greater focus. We must learn from our mistakes.”

Cosimo nodded. “Any advice you choose to impart to prepare us as we raise this child to fulfill his destiny will be considered the most valuable counsel.”

René had thought about this while traveling north from Sansepolcro the previous day. Once the Master had told him that the new Poet Prince was expected to be born into the Medici family, he knew that it was time to pass on the mantle he had worn for so many years. And he would, in all honesty, be relieved to be rid of it. He was a young man still, and yet at times he felt ancient and exhausted by the responsibilities of his heritage. The burden had grown far too heavy, and he would enjoy stepping back from it. And while his life had been filled with the blessings of the highly privileged, René d’Anjou

had also endured his share of tragedies. One, above all others, haunted him every day of his life and would until he took his last breath and could then beg her forgiveness in heaven.

Jeanne.

She was known by many names now as her legend continued to grow since the terrible day of her execution eleven years earlier. She was the Maid of Orléans, she was Jeanne d'Arc; even the English crossed themselves when speaking of her, calling her Joan of Arc and the Daughter of God, while whispering that the Church had made a dreadful mistake in her execution as a heretic. But for King René, Jeanne had been so much more: she was his spiritual sister, his family's protégée, the Expected One, the hope of France ... and his greatest failure. That he could not protect her in the end was unforeseeable; that he did not have the courage to do so was unforgivable. And this was the source of the self-loathing that tortured his sleepless nights since that wretched day in May of 1431 when Jeanne had been burned alive for the crime of hearing the voices of saints and angels too clearly.

If René was truly honest with himself, with his brethren in the Order, and with his God, it was his courage that had ultimately failed him—with a fair amount of help from his ego and his love of worldly comforts. He blamed his youth for this ultimate failing; he had only been twenty-two at the time, just three years older than Jeanne. He had been young enough to falter under such a weighty burden. He had not been willing to risk everything he had, everything he was, to try to save the girl he loved more than a sister, the prophetess who had been an angelic being in a girl's body. He knew she had been both conceived and raised to be the Daughter of God, and yet he had allowed her to die through his absolute passivity when she most needed him to save her.

Good King René now lived in a self-imposed hell every day of his life. He would not wish that on the innocent child who would be born into this terrible prophecy.

René cleared his throat. "Tell this future grandchild ... that he must have the courage of ten thousand lions, and most of all he must not fear Rome and their threats. The angels and the innocents who live among us must be protected at all costs." René grew silent for a moment remembering his own failure once again. "As you know, the Magi say that more angelic beings and special ones are coming now as the time returns. They must be cared for. Your young prince will be born to lead them, and he must never waiver in what he knows to be right action, for one misstep can be the ruination of all that is in God's greatest plans. I have seen that.

“For while God provides us with the outline of our destiny ...”

Cosimo finished the sentence, a tenet of the Order’s teachings, “... he also gives us the free will to fulfill that destiny—or not.”

As his old friend continued, Cosimo listened carefully, committing it all to his sharp memory. He saw the deep lines etched in René’s face, once a place where only laughter and witticisms reigned. But eleven years of terrible regret had aged him brutally and prematurely.

“I buckled under the pressures of the jackals in Rome, Cosimo, and to their henchmen priests in Paris. I despised their corruption, recognized it for all that it was and always has been, but in the end I feared their power more.” His voice cracked as he spoke, safe in the presence of one of his oldest friends, and a man with whom all shared secrets were sacrosanct. “I ... I could have saved her. I ...”

He could not continue. The years of guilt and agony came out in a flood as the king of Naples and Jerusalem buried his head in his hands and wept openly. Cosimo remained silent and waited with respect for his friend, his cousin of blood and spirit, to move through his pain.

René raised his head after another minute, wiping his eyes while he spoke. “I failed her, I failed the Order, and I failed God. Fra Francesco says that I have already been forgiven. But I do not accept that, for I have yet to forgive myself. You can help me to make amends for my failings, old friend, by raising this child to be the true Poet Prince of our prophecy. Let him learn from my mistakes and vow that he will not repeat them. And as my gift to all that he can become, I will leave him with a great legacy of treasure, including our most sacred Libro Rosso, for it belongs in the hands of the worthy. And I want him to have this.”

René reached behind his neck to unfasten the clasp of a long silver chain that hung out of sight and beneath his clothes. As he removed the necklace, Cosimo could see that it was a pendant, a small reliquary locket made of silver. René rose from his chair to place it in Cosimo’s hand, then paced the room as he explained.

“It was Jeanne’s,” he said simply, allowing the import of those words to land before continuing with his explanation. “It was her protective amulet, passed down through the Order and given to her at her equinox birth when it was determined that she was ... who and what she was. Jeanne wore it every day of her life once she was old enough to understand its purpose. On the day that she was taken, it had fallen off and was later found on the floor where she had last been dressed. The chain was broken. She must not have known it fell

off, as she would never have left without it. I contend that she would not have been arrested if she had been wearing it; she would be with us today. Its powers of protection are said to be unlimited. God knows that she wore it into heated battles where she could not possibly have survived, and yet she always emerged from those victorious and unscathed.”

René walked over and put his hand over Cosimo’s for emphasis. “There is great power in this amulet, Cosimo. See that the child understands it, and that he wears it always. It is a greater shield than armor. One day it may save his life, as it should have saved Jeanne the Maid.”

Cosimo moved toward the lantern on his desk to look at the amulet more closely.

It was oval and made like a locket, but with a cover that slipped over the top, like the lid on a tiny box. The lid covered the red wax seal that was used to both protect and authenticate religious artifacts. In this case, the seal was so ancient and deteriorated that it was impossible to determine what the original image had looked like in its entirety, but there were tiny stars visible in what appeared to be a circular pattern embedded in the wax.

While smaller than Cosimo’s thumbnail, the casing was, conversely, highly detailed and well preserved. Embossed into the silver cover was a miniature crucifixion sequence. At the foot of the cross, a long-haired and kneeling Mary Magdalene clung to the feet of her dying beloved. Strangely, the only other element—carefully crafted—was a columned temple perched on a hill behind the crucifixion. The temple looked distinctly Greek in style, resembling the Acropolis in Athens, the shrine built to honor feminine wisdom and strength.

Cosimo turned the case over to see the relic itself. It was minuscule, so tiny as to be nearly invisible, but it was there. A speck of wood was held in place by some type of resin, adhered into the center of a golden flower. Beneath the relic was a sliver of paper, handwritten in painstaking script:

v. croise

It was an abbreviation that the learned Cosimo understood, even written as it was in the antiquated French of the troubadours. *Vraie Croise*. He looked up at his friend. “This is a piece of the True Cross. The most sacred relic of the Order.”

“It is. And it will protect your grandson in a world that is most often hostile to those of us who would strive to change it.”

Cosimo took the amulet with gratitude, aware as he did so that René’s final words on the subject sounded a little too much like a prophecy of their own.

“It will save his life, no matter how determined others will be to take it.”



It would be several hours before the others arrived and the official meeting of the Order came together. Cosimo, in anticipation of René's potential melancholy over the day, had planned a diversion for his friend that he knew would be greatly appreciated. He led Rene through the grounds of Careggi in the golden heat of a Tuscan afternoon, toward an apple cellar beneath the stables. Rene was perplexed at the destination but followed with interest. No doubt Cosimo de' Medici had something extraordinary in that apple cellar. And René was relatively certain it was not apples.

“Art will save the world,” Cosimo said with a smile, and Rene returned the sentence. Passed down through the Order, it was believed to have been spoken by the holy Nicodemus, who was the first man to create a piece of Christian art. His breathtakingly beautiful sculpture of the crucified Christ was the stuff of legend in Tuscany and remained on permanent display in the ancient city of Lucca. Both Nicodemus and his patron, Joseph of Arimathea, were present at the crucifixion and aided in the removal of the body of Jesus from the cross. After witnessing the events of Good Friday, Nicodemus carved the first crucifix, in this case a life-sized version of the image he could not erase from his mind. The face of Jesus he carved was considered so sacred that the artwork was referred to only as the *Volto Santo*, the Holy Face.

On the day of the original Easter, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, along with another revered artist who would be known to history as Saint Luke, founded the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. They pledged through their Order to preserve the teachings of the Way as Jesus instructed through the gospel written in his own hand, the Book of Love. When Jesus announced his resurrection to Mary Magdalene on that sacred Sunday, the three men knew beyond any doubt that she was the chosen successor of their messiah. The teachings of the Book would endure under her guidance, and the newly founded Order would be sworn to protect this woman, her children, and her descendants through time. Most of all, they would be sworn to protect the true teachings, the Way of Love as Jesus had set it out most specifically for his followers. Often the Order would preserve these teachings through secret symbolism and encodings in art and literature.

As a result, like Cosimo and all nobles of the Order, René was a keen patron of the arts. He was looking forward to a time when he could focus

more completely on art, music, and architecture and less on politics. Because art was the language members of the Order used to communicate the truth, both Cosimo and René were constantly seeking new ways to see the beauty of the secret teachings expressed in art.

As the men approached the apple cellar, René stopped to listen to the deeply melodic sound emanating from behind the door. He looked at Cosimo, amused. “Singing? Do you have magical apples here in the wilds of Tuscany, Cosimo, which have the power of song?”

Cosimo laughed in return. “No, I have wayward artists who are delinquent in their commissions, who have the power of painting.”

René was taken aback. Cosimo was renowned as the most benevolent of patrons, giving generously to his artists, even supporting them and their families completely, while lecturing other patrons to be more magnanimous. “You, of all patrons? *You* lock up your artists in a cellar?”

“Well, not normally. But Lippi is the exception to all rules.”

René gasped. “Lippi? You have *Fra Filippo Lippi* locked in there?”

Cosimo nodded nonchalantly. “Yes, I do. He doesn’t sound distressed to you, does he?”

René shook his head with no small degree of amazement. The booming voice from the apple cellar sounded positively—and inexplicably—ebullient. That the sound was coming from Filippo Lippi, who was the most impressive artist working in Florence, was astonishing. Lippi’s frescoes were considered so divinely inspired that even the king of France was interested in sending for him. But Lippi would never leave Cosimo de’ Medici or Florence, not for anything: not for the king of France, the king of the world, or a king’s ransom. For all his eccentricities, Fra Filippo Lippi was unerringly loyal to the patron who protected him against the perils of the world.

Much of what made Lippi’s art transcendent was his extraordinary ability to capture the divine by communicating with it directly. He was a member of what Cosimo referred to as his “army of angels,” an elite group of supremely gifted artists who had the talent to translate divine inspirations and teachings into canvas and marble. Within the Order, they were called “the angelics.” The coming of these scribes of a new era had also been predicted by the Magi. Cosimo had a passion for locating and cultivating these artists, and he had succeeded most exceptionally with the discovery of Lippi, as well as the remarkable sculptor known in Florence by the name Donatello. They were geniuses possessed by divine inspiration, and consequently, both were rarely

impressed by any earthly authority. The angelic qualities they embodied did not always make for the most harmonious lives here on earth. Lippi and Donatello were both notoriously difficult and temperamental. Indeed, no Florentine patron but Cosimo had ever been able to work successfully with either. But then again, no patron but Cosimo truly understood who, and what, they were.

As a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, René d'Anjou did understand and was fascinated. He had not thus far in his life had the luxury of cultivating such talent and working with artists of this nature, and he wanted to know more.

“Lippi is one of the foretold angelics?”

Cosimo nodded. “Of course. And I am hoping to give him some much-needed discipline so that one day he may teach some of the younger artists who show that same promise—without also imbuing them with his bad habits.”

Cosimo fished the key to the solid iron lock out of his pocket. “His minor incarceration here is for his own good and he knows it. Lippi must be protected from himself.”

René saw immediately that the apple cellar was no dank dungeon. Light filtered in on all sides through well-placed skylights, and Lippi painted happily, surrounded by everything he could possibly require while performing a day's work. The artist grinned as the two men entered and he addressed his patron.

“Ah, perfect that you have come now, Cosimo. See here, what I have done. I have added some touches here to the angels, and see how I have placed the book here carefully? No one will be the wiser.”

Cosimo introduced René to Lippi, but the artist was far too single-minded, completely absorbed in his current masterpiece, to show much concern for the fact that the king of Jerusalem and Naples was in his presence. He continued his questions to Cosimo.

“What do you think? Do I dare paint the book's cover red? Make it a true Libro Rosso?”

“At this stage, Lippi, I don't care if you paint it violet with rosy stripes, just as long as you finish it quickly. The archbishop is howling for your head. I will not be able to protect you from his wrath much longer.”

Cosimo turned to René and explained. “Lippi is notoriously late on all his commissions, distracted as he is by wine and women.”

“Oh no, no!” Lippi held up a hand. “*One* woman, Cosimo. Not women, plural. Woman, singular. There is only one perfect woman for me, created by God at the dawn of time from my own being, my own soul’s twin, and yes, she distracts me utterly ...”

Cosimo continued with René as Lippi lapsed into more ecstasy over his one true love.

“Meanwhile, Lippi is no less late with this altarpiece for Santa Annunziata, for a clergyman who is already carrying a grudge about Lippi’s abandoned vows. If he does not deliver it on time, the archbishop will withdraw his commission and lock him up—in a real cell. So you see, what I do here is quite humane.”

Lippi shrugged and nodded, with an afterthought. “It is. Although you could be more generous with the wine.”

“That’s enough out of you.” Cosimo’s smile was affectionate for all his harsh words. “You will have nothing but bread and water in a dark cell if you don’t finish this commission, so stop complaining.”

As Cosimo turned to go, he said over his shoulder, “And *of course* you should make the book red. That is the point, isn’t it?”

Lippi winked at him and returned to his masterpiece, bursting into a ribald song about making love on the banks of the Arno in the springtime, as he mixed the russet pigments to create the perfect, heretical red for the unsuspecting archbishop’s book cover.

Florence
1448

IN THE FIRST of many things that Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici would accomplish to absolute perfection, she conceived a son during the sacred ceremony of Immaculate Conception with her husband, Piero, in the spring of 1448.

The challenge faced by Cosimo de’ Medici, along with the female hierarchy within the Order, had been to find the perfect woman from a Florentine family to bear the child of their prophecy. This was not simply an issue of lineage but one of temperament and spiritual potential. The young woman chosen to mother this special child would require rigorous training in the ways of the Order, and it was critical that she not be resistant to the sometimes extreme heresy represented by the teachings found within the Libro Rosso. The suitable girl from an acceptable family would recognize the beauty and the truth of what the Order was teaching and therefore embrace her role as the new Mary for the dawning of the golden age. Just as the golden

child would come as predicted, so would the “Mary” who would give birth to him become apparent when the time was right.

Lucrezia Tornabuoni emerged as the unanimous choice to marry into the Medici dynasty and mother the Poet Prince. The adored and highly educated daughter of an exalted Florentine family, Lucrezia was renowned both for her brilliant intellect and for her extraordinary common sense. She was also recognized in the elite literary circles of Florence as a gifted poet, a valuable characteristic for the mother of this future prince to possess. The ultimate benefit of this arranged marriage was that Piero and Lucrezia managed to fall completely in love with each other while the preparations were under way to unite them.

Piero and Lucrezia de Medici had been married for almost five years when this ritual to conceive their Poet Prince was invoked. They had married early in 1444, their wedding date and time chosen by the Magi to ensure the greatest fortune. The year itself was considered a great blessing as it contained within it the number 444, called “the manifestation of the angels” in ancient numerology. Indeed, the union had appeared to bring angelic blessings thus far to the growing Medici family. During the course of their peaceful and contented marriage thus far, Piero and Lucrezia had blessedly conceived three beautiful and healthy daughters.

Lucrezia and Piero de’ Medici followed the rite of Immaculate Conception exactly as they were instructed by the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos. This approach to coupling within the bedchamber was the ultimate sacrament within the Order, and the two of them had been through intensive instruction in sacred union. They understood that Immaculate Conception was the conscious conception of a much-desired child. The beloved couple entered the bedchamber in an atmosphere of absolute love and trust for each other, and with the understanding that they were about to engage in a holy act that would bring forth a child to them, if God was so willing. During the act of coupling, each was to pray for the admission of the child into the woman’s body.

It was a beautiful ceremony, one in which the senses were invoked to create an environment of heaven on earth within a bedchamber transformed into a sacred space. White candles reflected soft shadows on the walls, and the bed was draped with the softest and finest white linens and silks. The room was filled with vases of enormous and fragrant white lilies, as it was believed that the scent of lilies stimulated the senses as a reminder of the divine. For centuries, lilies had been the symbol of the Immaculate Conception and were often found in paintings representing the blessed moment of Mary’s conception, but none outside the Order understood that this was a reference to the *hieros-gamos* ritual of sacred coupling. Lilies

represented the scent of heaven.

Lucrezia Tornabuoni came to her husband that night dressed in a silk gown of white trimmed with threads of gold. Together they invoked a prayer to the angels for the protected guidance of the soul of this child into Lucrezia's body. The invocation asked that a special gathering of angelic beings come together to watch over this little soul, to guide and protect him so that he might carry out the bidding of God during all his days on earth.

Outside the bedchamber, a musician strummed a lyre and sang low chants the couple could hear during their union. The songs were meant to invoke angelic presence through sound, stimulating yet another sense in a divine manner. In the corner of the room an altar had been erected, and upon it sat the holy book of true teachings, the Libro Rosso. It had been René d'Anjou's ultimate gift to the Medici family in anticipation of the prophesied prince who would usher in a rebirth of truth and enlightenment. The return of the Libro Rosso to Tuscany heralded the recognition of the Medici by the French royal family, including René's cousin King Louis XI, as legitimate heirs to European power. Louis XI also granted Piero and his descendants the right to use the French royal fleur-de-lis emblem within the Medici crest in perpetuity as part of this gift from within the spirit family of the Order.

And so it was to the lovely sound of angelic music, amid the bliss-inducing scent of lilies, and in the presence of this most sacred book that Lucrezia de' Medici conceived a son at the precise moment determined by the stars and instructed by the Magi.

In keeping with Lucrezia's reputation for flawless execution of every task given her, she delivered the little prince, healthy and wailing and with a finely shaped head covered with glossy black hair, precisely as scheduled on January 1, 1449. The parents named the child in honor of the saint who had inspired their family's basilica and was one of the greatest inspirations in the history of the Order, Saint Laurence. Within the archives of the Order, it was known additionally that Saint Laurence had been conceived immaculately; he was one of the first to bear the title of Poet Prince. His name was an important clue to this legacy: Laurence came from the root Laurentius, in reference to the laurel tree. From ancient times in Greece and later in Rome, the leaves of the laurel tree were used to create crowns in honor of the greatest poets of their times, thus leading to the term *poet laureate*. Great poets were crowned with laurel leaves. They were, in this way, declared as poet princes.

Therefore this saint could be the only namesake for such a blessed child. He would bear a name that invoked both poetry and power, courage against the greatest odds, and an unstoppable determination to carry out a mission for the highest good under God. That name was Lorenzo, and this blessed child

of Piero and Lucrezia de Medici
would carry it into the future in a way that even they could not have imagined
on the glorious day that he first drew breath.

Lorenzo de' Medici, the great Poet Prince, had arrived as scheduled by
God to herald the rebirth of a golden age.

*Château des Pommes Bleues
Arques, France
present day*

TAMARA WISDOM was in a creative frenzy. As a filmmaker, she had so many
possible subjects to choose from that she didn't know where to start. Her
documentary about Maureen's work was something she had been outlining
for months now. But there were so many directions in which to take it that she
was having trouble settling on just one. Trying to find just the right way to
present this story to the cynical world so that others might understand the
beauty and the magic of it was going to be the challenge.

And while studying the Libro Rosso over these last weeks, Tammy had
come up with another idea.

Destino.

Surely there had never been a more extraordinary documentary subject in
history. But would he allow her to tell his story? And what, exactly, was his
story? Could it be possible that the wise and gentle man with the fearsomely
scarred face really was what he claimed to be? Or was he just a crazy old
Italian with a great sense of drama and history? That was precisely what
would make Tammy's film amazing, if she could get him to concede to going
on camera with her. Let him tell the story, and let the viewer decide just how
real—or how crazy—this Destino really was.

Tammy picked up her copy of the Libro Rosso translations and read
through the legend one more time, making notes as she went.



*And so it was that on the darkest day of our Lord's sacrifice upon the cross,
he was tormented in his final hour by a Roman centurion known as Longinus
Gaius. This man had served Pontius Pilate in the scourging of our Lord Jesus
Christ and had taken pleasure in inflicting pain upon the Son of God. As if
this were not crime enough for one man, this same centurion pierced the side
of our Lord with his deadly spear at his hour of death.*

*The sky turned black at his moment of passing from our world into the
next, and it is said that within that moment the Father in heaven spoke*

directly to the centurion thus:

“Longinus Gaius, you have most offended me and all people of good heart with your vile deeds on this day. Your punishment shall be one of eternal damnation, but it will be an earthly damnation. You shall wander the earth without benefit of death so that each night when you lay down to sleep, your dreams will be haunted by the horrors of your own actions and the pain they have caused. Know that you will experience this torment until the end of time, or until you serve a suitable penance to redeem your tarnished soul in the name of my son Jesus Christ.”

Longinus was blind to the truth at this time in his life, a man of sadistic cruelty beyond redemption, or so it would seem. But it came to pass that he was driven mad by the pronouncement of his eternal sentence to wander in an earthly hell. Therefore he sought out Our Lady Magdalene in Gaul to beg her forgiveness for his misdeeds. In her unlimited kindness and compassion she forgave him and instructed him in the teachings of the Way, just as she would any new follower, and without judgment.

What became of Longinus Gaius is uncertain. He disappeared from the writings of Rome and from those of the early followers. It is unknown if he ever truly repented and found release from his sentence by a just God, or if he wanders the earth still, lost in his eternal damnation.

THE LEGEND OF LONGINUS THE CENTURION, AS PRESERVED IN THE LIBRO ROSSO

It was a haunting legend, made all the more astonishing by the fact that the old man named Destino claimed to be Longinus, a living witness to the history of the world for the last two thousand years. While he claimed that Mary Magdalene had forgiven him, it was only the forgiveness of God that would release him from his terrible curse.

He became the Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher on the day he took his vow to Mary Magdalene that he would devote his eternal life to teaching the Way of Love. This was his penance, and he would serve it for two thousand years. Destino spoke of training Matilda of Canossa, who lived a thousand years ago, as if she were his student just last year. And he talked often about their blessed Magdalene in tones of hushed reverence.

Tammy was constantly asking herself: Was Destino, as he claimed, the eternal soul who pierced the crucified Christ with his spear and was cursed by God to wander the earth? Or was he a madman with an extraordinary sense of storytelling? The beauty of it was that she was perfectly torn. At times she was absolutely convinced that he was one thing, and then he would do or say something that swayed her in the other direction.

Like the Roman centurion who had scourged Jesus, Destino had a terrible,

zigzag scar across his face. As part of her research, Tammy had been tracking this idea of the scar-faced man carefully through history. She had found references to him in art and literature throughout centuries, references that were certainly interesting if not convincing. Of course there were more plausible explanations than immortality: the scars on these men through history were a coincidence, or perhaps there was some kind of cult, or there was a ritualistic reason for men who called themselves Masters of the Order to inflict such a scar upon themselves.

Tammy felt that it would be her job as a filmmaker to take a neutral position, to simply present what Destino claimed and allow the viewers to make up their minds. The more she thought about the possibilities, the more excited she became. And now Destino was begging them to come to Florence. He promised that he would introduce them to the deepest secrets of the Renaissance and the hidden stories behind the greatest works of art in human history, proving once and for all that he was precisely what he claimed.

She put down her copy of the Libro Rosso and picked up an obscure, nineteenth-century British academic booklet about Botticelli that she had found in a storage box in the château's expansive library. No artist moved her quite like Sandro Botticelli. An enormous copy of his masterpiece known as *Primavera* hung in the entry of Bérenger's château. This *Allegory of Spring*, with its beautiful spirit of rebirth and celebration of life, never failed to inspire her. The great goddess of love, Venus, garbed in red and blessing the world, stood at the center of a lush garden where the three Graces danced beside the figure of Mercury. Flora, the goddess of spring, dropped flowers all about her, as the nymph Chloris was chased by the wind called Zephyr. Cupid fluttered at the top of the painting, preparing to shoot his arrow at one of the unsuspecting Graces.

She began to read about it:

Art historians disagree bitterly about the meaning of Botticelli's ultimate masterpiece, which was not called Primavera during the Renaissance. It was likely not given this title until the eighteenth century when it appears documented as such, although the first use of it is uncertain. There are possibly more theories about its origins and intentions than there are about any single piece of Renaissance art. Primavera is an enigma, challenging every viewer to judge its meaning based on individual conclusions. Because Botticelli did not leave us with any notes as to his inspirations, Primavera shall remain one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of the art world for all time.

Tammy prepared to skim the rest of the chapter until an unexpected sentence returned her focus.

The renowned Renaissance humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola said, “Whoever understands deeply and with intellect the reason for the separation of Venus from the trinity of Graces while studying Botticelli will find the proper way of advancing their understanding through this unequaled painting, known to us as Le Temps Revient.”

Le Temps Revient. Tammy jumped up with excitement and ran through the château in search of Roland and Bérenger. That Botticelli called his masterpiece *The Time Returns*, according to a contemporary from the Renaissance, just might be the most important—and most overlooked—detail in the history of Renaissance art.



Bérenger Sinclair held the tiny reliquary in his hand, running the chain through his fingers. It had captivated him since the day that Destino had given it to him as a gift. He had been skeptical at first, knowing that there were so many relics purported to be pieces of the True Cross.

With this little locket Destino had enclosed a card:

This once belonged to another Poet Prince, the greatest who ever lived. You are charged to wear his mantle. Do so with grace and God will reward you just as the prophecy promises.

Bérenger was relatively sure that the greatest Poet Prince referred to was Lorenzo de’ Medici, the godfather of the Renaissance. Bérenger was a bit ashamed to say that he didn’t know as much about Lorenzo as he perhaps should, although he was very willing to learn at Destino’s instruction. He had, however, studied the man revered by the French heretics as their great Poet Prince, the Renaissance heir to the dynasty of Anjou known as Good King René. Bérenger, whose birthday fell on the Feast of the Epiphany, had been raised to understand that his bloodline family expected him to inherit the title bestowed by ancient prophecy. Whereas Bérenger’s brother, Alexander Sinclair, remained in Scotland to learn the oil business, he had been sent to France at a young age to live with his grandfather in preparation for a different destiny. Bérenger’s grandfather had founded the Society of Blue Apples here in the Languedoc at the time he purchased the château. The property

and society were devoted to the heretical teachings and legends that existed in this part of France, specifically the understanding that Mary Magdalene

brought the true teachings of Jesus here following the crucifixion.

Bérenger's knowledge of French heretical tradition was unparalleled, but he was a novice at Italian history. And while he was aware that there had been Cathars in Italy, it was not until Maureen discovered the astonishing life of Matilda of Tuscany that he came to understand just how much secret teaching had come from—and remained in—that region of Italy.

And now Destino was insisting that they all come to Florence, as he wanted to instruct them in the history of the Order pertaining to that place and Lorenzo's time period. And he was emphatic that time was of the essence.

Bérenger raised the locket to his lips and kissed it, while praying to God to keep his Maureen safe in absentia.

*Florence
spring 1458*

DONATELLO WAS IN trouble again.

The brilliant and prolific Florentine sculptor, born Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi and known by the name Donatello, had achieved extraordinary fame in his lifetime. There was no artist to equal his skill or accomplishment anywhere in Florence, or arguably anywhere in Italy. The vast number of commissions he received was a tribute to his genius, but for all his supernatural skill, Donatello was notoriously temperamental and impossible to deal with. Cosimo de' Medici favored and protected Donatello, and in the general interest of peace for the Republic of Florence, he warned all potential patrons of the artist's extreme temperament. The Medici patriarch was often called in to mediate between his pet sculptor and the latest patron who had been offended by one of Donatello's outbursts. Or worse.

Cosimo was recounting Donatello's most recent escapade to the young Lorenzo, who had listened wide-eyed and amused at the legends of the artist for as long as he could remember. Lorenzo's most important lessons of governance were learned in moments such as these, from the wisdom of his grandfather.

"You see, Lorenzo, the more gifted the artist and the closer to God he is, the more difficult it is for him to function in our earthly environment. But this is why you must protect your artists against the philistines who would exploit them. Wealthy Florentines want Donatello to sculpt for them because it gives them prestige to have one of his originals in their palazzo. It is beneath him to take vanity commissions, and yet it is necessary for him to do so in order to avoid offending the spiteful members of influential families. But such men do not understand what these artists are and why they are. You and I do. These

artists are our special army, our angels who are able to convey the purest teachings of the divine through their work. They are the priests and scribes of our Order, providing as they do our newest translations of the oldest and most important gospel. *Our* gospel. So when they are attacked by those who do not have the ears to hear or eyes to see, it is your mission to defend and protect them.”

“Is it true that Donatello hurled one of his own busts off the balcony of the Palazzo di Signoria?”

Cosimo laughed. “Yes, yes. He did that just last week and it is one of the reasons he is in so much trouble. Scared the citizens below in the piazza near to death as the bust shattered into a million pieces. I only wish I had been there to see it!”

Lorenzo laughed, but his nine-year-old mind was constantly inquiring. It was not enough to understand that Donatello was capable of such high jinks; he also wished to understand what motivated them. From his earliest days, Lorenzo had been supremely fascinated by human behavior and had strived to understand it. Certainly a character study such as Donatello was a great learning tool.

“Why did he do it, Grandfather?”

“The patron was a vainglorious fool and a skinflint,” Cosimo explained. “First, he insisted that Donatello bring the bust to the Signoria and cart it up the stairs. Then, after the successful unveiling, where everyone agreed that it was yet another masterpiece of sculpture, the idiot of a man took our Doni aside and complained that there were flaws in the work! Now mind you, there were not, and everyone knew that there were not. The idiot believed that if he could convince Donatello that the work was imperfect, he could default on the rest of the commission payment. In short, he wanted to cheat an artist out of the payment he richly deserved.”

“That’s a terrible thing to do!” Lorenzo was scandalized.

“Not only is it terrible, it’s theft. No different from highway robbery, stealing what rightfully belongs to a man through force. And this is your next lesson as a defender of the arts, my boy. Artists are forever taken advantage of, cheated by those who do not understand how much of their heart and soul and essence goes into a work of art. All art is priceless, Lorenzo, and we diminish it every time we apply a monetary value to it. But this is the world that we live in, and why we must set an example as patrons. If Dante were here today, I believe he would create a special level of the *inferno* for men who cheat artists.”

Cosimo could see that Lorenzo's fine mind was taking it all in. The child missed nothing.

"And so Donatello feigned that he wanted to see the sculpture in the light, to inspect the flaws that the man claimed he had discovered." Cosimo stopped for a moment to laugh at what he knew was coming next. "The bust was brought to the balcony for inspection, and Donatello moved it to the edge, claiming that the best sunlight was right there ... and then he tossed it over the edge and watched it shatter! He then turned to the wretched man and said, 'I would rather see my work in a million pieces than in the hands of an undeserving swine such as you.' "

Lorenzo joined Cosimo, erupting in laughter at Donatello's insult to the horrid man who tried to cheat him.

"Of course, now the man wants his money back, which I, of course, will pay him as a means of protecting Donatello and keeping him out of a cell in the Bargello. But he is making enemies quickly, and after we defend him to the council today, we shall pay him a visit and ask that he try to behave himself for a while—before he breaks the Medici bank with restitution payments!"

Lorenzo set out on the walk to the Palazzo Vecchio with his grandfather, who continued to fill him in on the adventures of Donatello and the reason this particular mission today was of such great importance. Several of Donatello's outraged patrons had banded together to file a formal complaint about him, which now required diplomatic intervention.

"I don't understand what they are accusing him of, Grandfather."

Cosimo considered his explanation carefully. He had insisted that Lorenzo, as young as he was, accompany him today so that he could see the importance of standing up for the truth, even when it was very unpopular. Perhaps most of all when it was very unpopular. This case was delicate for one so young, and yet as always, Lorenzo was capable of understanding things well beyond the grasp of an average child.

"Donatello, as you may or may not have noticed, has a grand appreciation of beautiful young men. He is inspired by them. As he was when he created our magnificent *David*."

Lorenzo nodded. Donatello's bronze sculpture of David was the centerpiece of the Medici courtyard in the Via Larga. All agreed it was a masterpiece, a sculpture of extreme beauty and daring, the first fully sculpted nude figure in the round to be executed since antiquity.

“Well, there are men in the Signoria, closed-minded and spiteful men, who do not appreciate our *David*, or the fact that Donatello’s inspiration comes from other men. Remember, my boy, that the reason we chose David as our central theme is that he is the pure shepherd who conquers the corrupt and mighty against all odds. And that is what we must do today. Defend the pure against those who would use their might to defeat him.”

Cosimo, renowned in Florence for his measured temperament, was much beloved by the common folk and the nobility alike. The majority of sitting members of the Signoria were in awe of his influence and his brilliance. And so while he had to be patient with the order of the proceedings in the council chamber, he was quick to control the room and move them along to the issue he needed to address. Lorenzo watched his grandfather’s every move in awe and committed each moment of that day to memory.

The men who had complaints against Donatello each said their piece against the sculptor, who was significantly not in attendance. This absence was another stroke of genius by Cosimo, who knew that Donatello’s presence in the council chamber would be disastrous. Cosimo held his tongue in annoyance as he listened to the accusers. Each proposed that Donatello’s “immorality” was a negative influence on the Republic of Florence and that he flaunted his homosexuality in such a way as to encourage others to become sodomites. They knew that accusing the artist on a morality charge would likely create the harshest sentence against him.

Then Cosimo stood and addressed the Signoria. They awaited a measured and intelligent speech. But Cosimo de’ Medici stunned everyone in the council that day. He had a point to make—for Florence and for his grandson, who would one day rule in his place—and there was nothing measured about Cosimo’s defense of Donatello.

“How dare you!” roared the Medici patriarch, as he slammed his hand flat against the heavy table before him. “How dare you—any of you—take the position that you are experts on whom a man can and cannot love! How dare you be so presumptuous as to say what may or may not inspire a man to create art!”

There was shocked silence in the room as Cosimo lowered his voice. He began pointing at individuals in the chamber. “You, Poggio. And you, Francesco. You have both dined in my home and admired the sculpture of David that graces the center of the loggia. Tell me, what was your reaction to that piece of art?”

The first man, Poggio Bracciolini, was an ally whom Cosimo had planted in the Signoria that day. Poggio was a devoted humanist and patron of the

arts, and not incidentally a high-ranking member of the Order. His response was precisely what was expected of him. Later Cosimo would explain this strategy to Lorenzo: never ask a question in public unless you already know for certain that it will be answered in your favor.

“It is a masterpiece of sculpture. I have never seen anything as flawless as the *David* that was created for your palazzo,” Bracciolini replied perfectly.

The second man gave a similar response, with several other members of the council nodding in agreement. Florentines, for all their flaws, were ardent art lovers. Cosimo seized the moment and continued.

“Yes, Donatello’s *David* may even be the premiere work of art that we see in our time. Not since Praxiteles has there been such divinity in sculpture. And so I say to you all, who are you, who am I, who are any of us to question this man’s inspiration? If Donatello is able to create the most sublime works of art because he is inspired by love, then this is a gift from God that none of us has the right to question. Whom he chooses as his muse is not my business, nor yours. And how he chooses to love that muse is even less for us to consider or judge. Love is love. It is God-given, and a sacrament. It is not for any man to judge. I stand by that pronouncement, and I stand by the fact that I thank God every day for any man who can love so deeply that he is able to create art that is so very obviously divine!”

Only silence greeted the end of Cosimo’s speech, for what man could argue with the eloquence of what had just been invoked within that chamber?

Donatello was pardoned and Lorenzo was left with one of the most powerful lessons of his life, along with a piece of wisdom that rang in his ears for the rest of his days.

Love is love. It is God-given, and a sacrament. It is not for any man to judge.



Lorenzo accompanied his grandfather to Donatello’s studio to advise the artist of the positive outcome. The door to his workshop was opened not by the temperamental artist himself but by a calm and friendly face, a man Lorenzo had met on other occasions and liked tremendously. He was Andrea del Verrocchio, a master sculptor and art teacher in his own right, but more important, he was a key member of the Order and one of Cosimo’s most trusted artists. Verrocchio had once been apprenticed to Donatello and was one of the few who ever survived the maelstrom.

“Andrea, what a wonderful surprise!” Cosimo embraced the tall man with

the gentle demeanor. "What kind of torment do you inflict upon yourself that you return to be abused by your former master?"

"I heard that!" The unmistakable voice of Donatello rang out from the adjacent room.

"You were meant to," Cosimo shouted back. "And do let us know if you intend to grace us with your presence, will you? I have a commission for you, but I can give it to Andrea here if you prefer."

They could hear the grumbling and scurrying in the other room. For all Donatello's temperament, he worshipped Cosimo and would never keep him waiting too long.

Verrocchio turned to call forward a young man, a teenager who was grinding pigments across the room. The youth was beautiful; covered in golden curls and with deep-set amber eyes, he had the appearance of a young lion. The young man stood up and smiled a crooked, endearing smile at the visitors. He came forward, bowed gracefully in obvious recognition of the esteemed company, but then looked down at his hands apologetically. "Vermilion. It is messy, so I dare not touch anything or anyone."

Verrocchio made the introductions. "Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, I present to you Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi. We call him Sandro. You shall be hearing more from him and soon, as I can say with absolute certainty that I have not before seen such raw natural talent in an apprentice, perhaps ever."

Sandro, well aware of his talent yet determined to appear humble, made a face at Lorenzo and shrugged. It was a self-effacing yet strangely confident gesture for one so young. Lorenzo laughed, liking him immediately, and asked Sandro to show him how the messy vermilion pigment was made. Lorenzo had grown up splattered with paint, watching in awe all the great artists who were integral to the Medici household and protected by Cosimo and Piero alike. He had always been fascinated by the pounding of minerals and the elaborate mixing that went into the creation of the paint and was excited at the prospect of getting his own hands a little dirty.

Cosimo raised a questioning eyebrow in Sandro's direction as the boys wandered off. Verrocchio explained in a lowered voice. "He's extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it. It's not just his talent but his understanding. He is a natural."

"An angelic?"

Verrocchio nodded. "He may be *the* angelic we have been waiting for. His abilities are unnatural. Supernatural. I will work with him on the preliminaries, but then if all goes as I believe it will, he will need greater

training. He is worthy of the Master, I think.”

Cosimo watched where the two boys were working in the pigment, Lorenzo happily grinding and crushing with the mortar and pestle, as Sandro guided his technique. There was an aura around the two of them, a sense of fate hanging in the air that was not lost on either Cosimo or Andrea. These boys were destined to be friends. Indeed, it appeared that they already were.

“If he is what you say he is, then I shall move him into the palazzo and raise him as a Medici.”

The conversation was interrupted by the loud and dramatic entrance of Donatello.

“Ah, my patron, my savior. Tell me you have come to bring news of your poor, humble artist’s exoneration from the tyranny of the Florentine philistines.”

Cosimo replied, “You are neither poor, thanks to me, nor humble, thanks to your talent. But what you are is free. Yes, you have been exonerated and shall live to sculpt another day.”

Donatello threw his arms around Cosimo. “Thank you, thank you! Never has there been a kinder or more beloved patron than my magnanimous Medici.”

“You are welcome, Doni. But now I think we must agree that you will take no more vanity commissions, as they are not in anyone’s best interest. Further, I have decided to monopolize your time with a commission of my own. I want you to create a sculpture of Our Lady, the Queen of Compassion.”

“Maria Magdalena?”

“Yes. Life-sized. It will be a gift to the Master from all of us.”

Donatello nodded. “And what are my parameters?”

“You have none from me, other than to use your heart as you sculpt her and pour your love of Our Lady into the piece. I do not care what medium you use and will leave all artistic decisions up to you. Just make her magnificent and memorable, a true symbol of the Order and what we all stand for. And of course, I will pay you in advance so you are not tempted to take any other commissions, which will distract you and end in certain disaster. Do we have an agreement, Doni?”

The artist threw his arms around Cosimo again. “Yes, sweetest patron! I shall sculpt Our Lady as she has never been seen before. Leave everything to me!”



Donatello spent the better part of a year sculpting Maria Magdalena. He made the decision to create her out of wood, a remarkable challenge for a life-sized creation. He chose white poplar for its pliability, and finding the piece of wood large enough to fulfill his vision was in itself a task that took several months to accomplish.

He sculpted in absolute solitude and secrecy. No one, not even his closest assistants, were allowed to enter the room where he carefully whittled and carved away at the figure of his Maria Magdalena. When Cosimo inquired as to his progress, Donatello merely smiled, with a faraway gleam in his eye. “You shall see,” he said simply.

The day came for the unveiling, and Cosimo had the sculpture moved under Donatello’s guidance to the villa at Careggi for a meeting of the Order. The Master would be in attendance tonight, and the creation would be presented to him and the others. Donatello was giddy with excitement, while at the same time slightly apprehensive. Although he was renowned for his enormous faith in his own talents, which was more than justified, this particular commission had arguably been the most challenging of his artistic life. He had poured his heart and his soul into this piece, and like all artists of the Order used the technique called “infusion” to transfer his intention for the piece directly into the materials. If the infusion was done properly, the effect went beyond the visual, and the art transferred the artist’s emotional and spiritual intention to the viewer. It was an artistic alchemy, something which could only be achieved by masters such as Donatello, who had perfected the process.

And so his Maria Magdalena was infused with all the devotion and understanding that he had of her. He knew, if given the chance, that she would convey her essence to those who viewed her. But first they would have to overcome what they saw with their eyes, because his Magdalena was unlike anything that had been created before.

He had not set out to depict her this way. But she had insisted. He could feel it every time his hands went to touch the wood; it all but screamed to him what it was, precisely, she wanted to look like. And he had taken a vow, like every artist of the Order before him beginning with Nicodemus himself, to protect the legacy of Madonna Magdalena at all costs. He did just that, creating art that was purely expressive by listening to exactly what she demanded of him as he sculpted her.

The gathering was brought to order as Fra Francesco, the Master, opened

with a blessing, followed by the prayer of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher:

*We honor God while praying for a time
when these teachings will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.*

Following the prayer, Cosimo made a short speech, dedicating this new work of art to Fra Francesco, while praising Donatello for his commitment and his genius.

But as Donatello feared, there was absolute silence in the great dining hall of Careggi when the sculpture was unveiled. If the attending members of the Order were expecting to see their Queen of Compassion depicted in all her luminous beauty, they were to be thoroughly disappointed and more than a little shocked.

In Donatello's sculpture, Maria Magdalena was utterly wretched.

Her body was emaciated and naked underneath a mass of hair, which covered most of her, as it flowed nearly to her feet. It was extraordinary that even in the carving of the wood and without paint, the artist had conveyed perfectly that Magdalena was unwashed, her hair matted to her head. Her eyes were haunting in their hollow stare, and she was mostly toothless.

"She looks like a beggar woman!" a female voice whispered.

"It is blasphemy to the Order!" came a male whisper, slightly louder.

The Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher rose from his chair and approached the sculpture. He ran his fingers lightly over the intricately carved hair of this terrible, tragic sculpture. After considering it for a long moment, he turned to Donatello.

"It is perfect. It is art. Thank you, my son, for this unequaled blessing you have given all of us."

Donatello began to weep openly under the love of the Master. The pressures of the last year, the need to perfect this sculpture, had weighed heavily on his spirit. He knew that there was a tremendous chance of its being misunderstood, and from the initial whispered comments, he feared that it had been.

It was the child among them who ultimately came to his rescue. Using his remarkable intelligence and sensitivity of spirit, it was the nine-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici who interpreted the art for those who did not have eyes to see. He moved toward the sculpture as if mesmerized and stood before it,

tilting his head a little as he looked at Maria Magdalena, to whom he was deeply devoted. The assembled Order watched Lorenzo in absolute silence. He was their Poet Prince, and his interpretation would be critical.

Donatello, standing closest to the sculpture, whispered to Lorenzo. “You hear her, don’t you?”

Lorenzo nodded, never taking his eyes off the sculpture. He walked around it, looking at every side of her, all the while appearing to listen to some phantom voice that no one else in the room heard. Finally he stopped and turned to face the assembly. A single tear slid down his cheek.

“Tell us what you see and hear, Lorenzo.” It was the voice of the Master, warm and encouraging.

Lorenzo cleared his throat, not wanting to cry in front of the assembled Order. He began haltingly at first but then found his voice as he continued.

“She is ... presented here as she asked to be. For this is how she truly is. Not to me or to you. To us she is the most beautiful woman who ever lived; she is our queen. But this is not how the world sees her. It is not how the Church would have the world understand her. They call her terrible names, tell lies about who she was. They take away her life, her love, and her children. They make her a sinner. They take this woman who would save all of us with her courage and wisdom and love, and they turn her into a beggar.

“The Magdalena that Donatello has sculpted here is wretched, because that is what has been made of her by those who do not have eyes to see and ears to hear. It is for us to change that, to restore her to the throne of the Queen of Heaven. And to do that, we must remember how others see her and not how we see her.”

Lorenzo was choking back the beginnings of a sob now, as devotion overcame him. Still all eyes were focused entirely on him as he made his final pronouncement, solidifying what most in attendance already knew: Lorenzo de’ Medici was growing into a more remarkable prince than any of them could have imagined.

“I think ...” Lorenzo choked back the tears and looked over at Donatello. “I think she is the most beautiful piece of art that I have ever seen.”

And to punctuate that pronouncement, Donatello fell to his knees and sobbed with relief. The infusion had worked. His art had been understood. Most of all, *her* message had been delivered.

*Headquarters of the Confraternity of the Magi
Florence*

January 6, 1459

“HOW DO I look, Mother?”

Lucrezia de' Medici looked at her son, who had just celebrated his tenth birthday, and fought back the tears. They were tears of joy and pride as she straightened the gold-embroidered coat so that it hung perfectly over the breeches worn by her growing boy. She would always think that her eldest son was absolutely perfect, for all that he had inherited the squashed nose of the Tornabuoni family and the infamous underbite of the Medici. While Lorenzo was not a traditionally beautiful child, there was a radiance about him that was undeniable. Further, he was unerringly polite and almost unfathomably responsible for his age.

And it was that sense of responsibility that was gnawing at him as he squirmed in the elaborate silk and damask costume, which he would be wearing in today's parade of the Magi. It was the Feast of the Epiphany, the day when the three kings came to adore the infant Jesus in the manger. Each year in Florence this blessed event was reenacted by the Confraternity of the Magi, with a magnificent procession through the streets of the city, followed by a festival. The celebration would be grander than ever this year, more elaborate and lavish: Cosimo had demanded it and seen to the more extreme details. Because the Medici family were the founders and leaders of this particular confraternity, Lorenzo would today be playing the role of the young king, the golden one known as Gaspar. He took his task very seriously, knowing that there was a weight on his slender shoulders. This was not simply a part to play in a parade; he knew it, and the people of Florence knew it. No, this was Lorenzo's coming-out party, the announcement to the world by the Medici that Lorenzo was preparing to take on the exalted mantle of the Poet Prince. The crown he wore today was very heavy on his head. No doubt it would leave marks on his skin for days to come.

In Tuscany, the confraternities had become an integral part of society, the spiritual heart of their towns. In a number of major cities—Florence chief among them—the confraternities became distinct forces of political power as well as social welfare. The type of confraternity one belonged to could tell much about a family and where its interests and loyalties were. The first confraternity founded in Florence was devoted to the archangel Raphael, and its members performed acts of charity related to healing. Others confraternities were founded to honor the memory of a specific saint. The more extreme were based on penitence and required acts of mortification of the flesh.

The Medici had co-founded the Confraternity of the Magi to give them a vehicle in which to openly and publicly display their belief in the esoteric without offending the Catholic population. For all their secret heresies, every Medici family leader since the days of Charlemagne had been an expert at appearances. Cosimo belonged to no fewer than ten confraternities and had recently had a cell installed for himself within the Dominican monastery of San Marco. Periodically, he would retreat there for meditation and prayer with the brethren. That he spent a fortune expanding the buildings and hiring the quiet yet brilliant monk Fra Angelico to fresco the place to perfection was not lost on the grateful Catholic population of Florence. For all public purposes, Cosimo de' Medici was the most devout of Catholics, and he was only too willing to prove that devotion through his extraordinary generosity.

But the Feast of the Epiphany was not a day to be solemn or penitent. It was a day to celebrate the coming of the Prince. Cosimo had made generous donations to guilds and committees throughout the city in honor of the event—and in his grandson's name. At the age of ten, Lorenzo was now one of the most generous donors in Florence. His generosity was not lost on the common people, to whom he was rapidly becoming beloved.

Lucrezia de' Medici straightened Lorenzo's jewel-encrusted crown one final time and kissed him on the forehead before turning him over to his father, who would escort him to the elaborately caparisoned white stallion that awaited the young King Gaspar. She sighed as she watched him depart, his growing body awkward under the massive silks that weighed him down. For all that he was the child of a divine prophecy, he was still her little boy.

"Lorenzo, my son," she called after him. "Don't forget to have fun!"



Florence, a city known for its elaborate, even decadent festivals, had never seen the equal of the Feast of the Epiphany as it occurred in 1459. The procession of the Magi itself was stunning, with Cosimo leading it on a pristine white mule as the old king Melchior. A train of wagons laden with bejeweled chests and colorful silks followed him, as did a camel brought over from Constantinople on a cargo ship. An entourage of Medici supporters, all of whom were secret members of the Order, followed as Cosimo's attendants. Cosimo's most loyal friend, the renowned writer and humanist Poggio Bracciolini, led the entourage. His son, Jacopo Bracciolini, was the same age as Lorenzo and as such had been chosen to walk in the parade alongside the

Medici prince. The two boys were friends and had been tutored by the same great men of Florence. Jacopo was a beautiful child, golden-haired and fair, with features so delicate that they were almost pretty, and a lithe agile body. His was a marked physical contrast to the swarthy, sturdy Lorenzo.

Jacopo had been petulant about being cast in the procession as Lorenzo's servant, so to appease his ego he was given the role of the Keeper of the Cats. As such, he was allowed to walk one of the exotic African servals, an ill-tempered wild cat that looked like a shrunken leopard.

"Hey, Lorenzo, look at what I can make the cat do!" Jacopo yelled up to where Lorenzo was perched on a huge white stallion. He pulled up sharply on the cat's velvet lead, which was attached to a bejeweled collar. The cat growled but rose up to walk on his two hind legs. He took a few steps as if walking upright. Jacopo burst into delighted laughter.

Lorenzo laughed to appease his friend but was inwardly concerned that the cat was suffering discomfort as well as indignity. He attempted to distract Jacopo by pointing out some of the other animals in the procession, but to no avail. Jacopo was finding an audience for his antics with the serval and was clearly loving the attention. He began shouting, "Behold! I am the Master of the Cats!" each time he pulled on the poor animal's lead.

Lorenzo stayed the course, riding as tall and proud as a young king, and left Jacopo behind to play jester. He was the undisputed star in the parade, the figure who drew the cheers of the Florentine people. As Lorenzo passed by, astride the white horse and dressed in his finery as the golden young king, the crowds erupted with adulation. Lorenzo, at first very serious in his role, was swept away in the excitement and pageantry of the moment. He smiled at the people, his people, with the infectious grin for which he would one day become famous as an adult. He waved at the Florentines, and they waved in return, shouting blessings and throwing roses.

"He is magnificent!" a woman in the crowd screamed, and the others began to take up the chant: "*Magnifico! Magnifico!*"

By the time the procession had reached its destination at the monastery of San Marco, where a living nativity had been created, Lorenzo's position in the hearts of the Florentine people was secure.

He would forevermore be known by the name that was as much a prophecy as it was praise, for he was destined to grow into it spectacularly: *Lorenzo il Magnifico*.

Lorenzo the Magnificent.

New York City

present day

THE BEEPING OF a text message woke Maureen Paschal early on the morning of the twenty-second day of March. She reached blindly to the bedside table until she felt the source of the offending noise. She wasn't really annoyed, despite her sleep-deprived state. No doubt it was one of her beloved friends in Europe, anxious to be the first to contact her on her special day and miscalculating the time difference. She hit the button on her phone to read the message. It said:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY. I HAVE A GIFT FOR YOU.

Maureen sat up in bed now. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and wondered who had sent the message; she didn't recognize the number. The text message had come from Europe; it was attached to an Italian phone number.

Maureen padded out to the little kitchen to make coffee. Caffeine first; all things must happen in order. She searched sleepily through the cupboards. Dark-roast coffee beans, a grinder, and a French press would at least get her started, and she was certain that all those things would be here.

Maureen smiled to herself as she thought about it. There were two things that Maureen would bet her life B  renger would have on hand at all times, and those things were great coffee and better wine. She was right on both counts. The night before she had taken a quick look at the small but exquisite wine selection that he kept in a custom-built cooler off the dining room. Not surprisingly, there were bottles from several private vineyards in the Languedoc, elegant and limited vintages that were not exported under normal circumstances. But the owner of this wine collection was nobody's average customer.

B  renger had purchased the apartment on Fifth Avenue years ago because of its extraordinary location: the front door of the apartment complex faced the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. B  renger was a devoted art connoisseur, and he had made a sport of acquiring properties all over the world within easy reach of magnificent museums. He owned property on the Rue de Rivoli across from the Louvre and had a little place in Madrid, around the corner from the Prado. But B  renger had a special passion for the Met. His schedule rarely allowed him to get to New York anymore, so he was delighted to turn his keys to the Fifth Avenue pied-  -terre over to his beloved Maureen—who was equally happy to accept them. Her career as an author brought her to New York regularly, and the apartment would provide her with a perfect place to call home.

Maureen opened the bag of imported Italian coffee beans that she had

found in the second cupboard and inhaled the rich scent. The smell of coffee alone was enough to awaken her senses and she was already able to think more clearly. Whom did she know in Italy who would know that it was her birthday? Could it be her spiritual mentor, the enigmatic teacher known as Destino? Back in Florence now, he was inclined toward mysterious messages and secretive behavior.

She put water on to boil and grabbed her cell phone. She hit the reply button and sent a text message in reply.

THANK YOU. WHO IS THIS?

Maureen picked up the remote control for the television and turned on a national morning show. There was the usual offering of pop culture and daily news, and she left it on as she made coffee. She was momentarily distracted by a gossip piece that had all the women in the studio buzzing. Supermodel and socialite Vittoria Buondelmonti was going to make an announcement today that the tabloids were drooling over in anticipation. The Italian catwalk queen was the mother of a two-year-old boy who, until now, she had kept sheltered from the press. The paternity of the boy had been the cause of speculation since the earliest days of her pregnancy, and Vittoria had remained adamant that she wasn't going to reveal who had fathered the child. She had been involved in a string of high-profile relationships before the birth of her son, and the rag papers had speculated endlessly on the paternity issue as they presented photographs of Vittoria with the many men she had dined out with: an international soccer star, a rock-and-roll icon, a race driver, a Greek billionaire, an oil tycoon, her childhood sweetheart from Florence.

Tomorrow Vittoria Buondelmonti was going to reveal the identity of her child's father to the international press. Why she had decided to do this now was unclear. But as Maureen clicked around the networks to see if anything more interesting or important was happening in the world, she found that Vittoria and her love child were the hot topic on all the morning shows. Maureen hit the off button on the remote with a grunt.

She forgot all about Vittoria's paternity drama as her cell phone beeped with a text message response to her question.

I AM A FRIEND OF DESTINO. AND BERENGER.
I WILL SEE YOU TONIGHT.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she said out loud. Maureen had been quoting Lewis Carroll often these days, because she felt she had fallen down the rabbit hole herself, perhaps never to return to reality again. Reality, it seemed, was a thing of the past. She wasn't sure that she would ever get used to the surreal turns that her life had taken.

The journey had begun a few years earlier when Maureen first met Béranger Sinclair, who introduced her to the mysterious world of heretics and history that he presided over in the southwest of France from his ancestral home. Her life had exploded when she discovered an ancient manuscript in a French village called Arques, a legendary gospel written in the hand of the apostle Mary Magdalene herself. While others had been searching for this document for nearly two thousand years, many believed it had been Maureen's sole destiny to find it. Within this world of hidden Christian history, which was unfolding for Maureen as she delved deeper into the secret societies of Europe, were a series of prophecies that had been passed down for countless generations. The prophecy of the Expected One told of a woman who would rediscover the true, unedited teachings of Jesus and his descendants and would share these with the world when the time was right.

Maureen was the Expected One.

It was a dizzying, electrifying, and often perilous experience. Maureen's discovery of what was now known as the Arques gospel had led her to write her first international best seller about the legacy of Mary Magdalene. The manuscript was an explosive document that alleged that Magdalene was legally married to Jesus and was the mother of his children. But perhaps the most important revelation within was not about blood or marriage but rather about a spiritual legacy. The Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene proclaimed that she was the chosen successor of Jesus, the apostle to whom he entrusted his most sacred teachings. And before his death on the cross, Jesus had given Mary Magdalene a manuscript of his own. He called it the Book of Love.

That Jesus had written a gospel in his own hand was the most controversial revelation that Maureen had ever stumbled upon. How was it possible that Jesus had written his own book, with his teachings indisputably preserved in his own hand, and yet no one had ever heard of such a thing? As she researched this question, Maureen discovered that the Book of Love was so controversial, so earth-shattering, that it was necessarily kept secret by those who revered it—and by those who despised it. Her search for the book took her through Inquisition records and deep into the histories of France and Italy. Maureen discovered that a secret society called the Order of the Holy Sepulcher had protected the Book of Love and those who were sworn to preserve the lost gospel of Jesus Christ and teach from it. It was her discovery of this shadowy Order—which still existed today—that had led her to discover Matilda of Canossa, a Tuscan countess who had lived in the eleventh century.

Matilda was a child of this secret legacy. Born into the prophecy of the Expected One at the vernal equinox, she possessed the same powers of

prophecy and vision that had haunted Maureen since her childhood. And Matilda was raised on the heretical message of the Book of Love. She was the devoted keeper of a version of this gospel, a copy made in the first century by the apostle Philip and then brought to Italy. To Matilda and subsequent generations of heretical Italians, the gospel was known as the Libro Rosso—the Red Book. The Libro Rosso also contained a series of prophecies passed down through the women of the bloodline, as well as their personal histories and lineage documents. The Libro Rosso, with its spiritual teachings of love and its prophecies for mankind, its preservation of the dynastic details of the bloodline descendants of Jesus, was arguably the most valuable book in human history. Matilda had once possessed it, and she used it to change the world.

While she researched Matilda, there were times when Maureen felt that they were blending into the same person. She felt Matilda's pain and joy, observed her life in vivid detail as she wrote. It was almost as if she were writing her own memoirs, remembering intimate moments of her deepest loves and closest friendships, understanding Matilda's most private longings and fears firsthand. Their consciousness and memories had somehow combined, merged to become one, as Maureen wrote.

And it was not the first time she had experienced that feeling. Maureen had the same exhilarating yet troubling experience while writing about Mary Magdalene in her first book. Viewing the first century through Magdalene's eyes had nearly driven Maureen to the edge of sanity. She was certainly not claiming anything as grandiose as having walked in Mary Magdalene's exalted sandals in a past life. No, what she experienced was something very different, some strange yet magical gift of storytelling that had been passed down to women in her lineage for thousands of years. She understood it as a type of genetic memory, a collective consciousness that existed in the DNA of these women to whom she was so blessed to be connected, a memory that she could tap into. As such, it was exalted in its own unique way. It made the passage of time simply not matter, as if all periods could be accessed simultaneously, as if they were happening all at once.

It was a miracle, and yet it was a terrible beauty at the same time, a daunting responsibility. She could not curse the experience, God-given as it appeared to be, but she had spent the better part of the last four years trying to understand it all. Maureen hesitated to discuss this with anyone but Bérenger, as he alone understood it—and everything about her—perfectly. In this way she had discovered that he was her one true soul mate, the other half of her heart and spirit, and there was an effortlessness in their communication that

she still marveled at and completely cherished. Bérenger had become her ultimate sanctuary in a world that could not understand her gift and therefore often sought to destroy it.

Matilda of Canossa had obsessed Maureen for the better part of the last two years, possessing her first when Maureen read the autobiography of the controversial countess, and then as she wrote her latest book in honor of this remarkable woman. *The Time Returns: The Legacy of the Book of Love* detailed Matilda's adventures and accomplishments. Today, her birthday, was the official release date for the North American edition, which was what had brought Maureen to New York. There was a launch party tonight at the Cloisters, the medieval department of the Met, in honor of Maureen and Matilda.



Reigning over the north end of Manhattan with unequaled views of the Hudson, the Cloisters is the elegant uptown sister of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its stunning display of art and architecture from medieval Europe is preserved in a magnificent and unique building, one created through the use of authentic architectural elements imported from medieval French monasteries. Though there are many treasures to be viewed among the nearly five thousand artifacts on display in the Cloisters, the unparalleled attraction was the unicorn tapestries. The seven magnificent wall hangings, created in Flanders during the Renaissance, depict in vivid details the story of a determined hunt—and ultimately the brutal killing—of a majestic unicorn.

Maureen had seen replicas of these tapestries while in France, when she first met with the enigmatic spiritual teacher known only as Destino at the headquarters of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. For the Order, the unicorn was a symbol of the pure teachings of Jesus Christ as passed down to his descendants through the Book of Love. *The Killing of the Unicorn* series was a type of textbook for the Order, a particularly beautiful teaching manual woven in woolen threads to illustrate the terrible tragedy that occurs when pure beauty is destroyed and truth is lost. When writing the truth in plain language was heresy and meant certain death, the Order found other means of communicating through symbols and secrets—for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. *The Killing of the Unicorn* represented the destruction of the authentic teachings of Jesus, the Way of Love, as told through symbolism.

Maureen took some time to view the exquisite Cloisters tapestries before stepping in to her public duties as the guest of honor for the launch party.

Her thought, as she was collected by her publicist and brought back to the reality of the work she had to do this night, was that this series of priceless, exquisite tapestries was a tragic reminder that we live in a reality where love is not honored as it should be—and men are all too inclined to kill unicorns.



Maureen sensed her before she saw her. It was part of her life, the strange intuition that had saved her on so many occasions. The shiver that caught her attention as she was signing a book for an avid reader alerted her that something significant was about to happen.

The line of people waiting for Maureen's signature wrapped through the cloister and through the stunning gardens, which contained the same flora and fauna depicted within the unicorn tapestries. Beyond the queue, she saw the woman who was different from the rest.

Easily six feet tall before donning four-inch stilettos, the woman was stunning, a goddess incarnate. She walked with the grace and authority of one who knew that the entire world stopped and stared as she approached—always had, always would. Sleek black hair hung to her waist and framed a face of angular perfection. Perfectly lined amber-colored cat's eyes stared at Maureen across the room, unblinking, as she approached.

Maureen caught her breath as she recognized the woman who was the current darling of the media. Vittoria Buondelmonti glided regally past the gawking commoners who waited in line for Maureen's autograph. Everyone recognized this celebrity of the moment, and several people dared to photograph her with their cell phones. Vittoria ignored them all, and with a flourish she presented Maureen with a large manila envelope. Her Italian accent dripped like honey from her words.

"Happy birthday. Maureen. Here is the gift I promised you. But I recommend you do not open it until you are alone later."

Maureen saw that the envelope was sealed with heavy tape. She couldn't open it now without a knife or scissors, although she was filled with curiosity about it. Her question was inspired by the earlier text message: "You are a friend of Destino? And of Bérenger?"

"Of course. I know them both very well. They will find this gift as interesting as you will." She gestured with her elegant, long arms to the

queue. “Congratulations on all of your success. B  renger tells me you are ... the real thing.” She sniffed at this, as if to indicate her skepticism, before pivoting perfectly to make her exit. “*Buona sera* and *buon compleanno*,” she tossed over her shoulder as she slinked toward the door without ever looking back.



The envelope screamed at Maureen to open it for the two excruciating hours that she remained in her place to sign books and talk to readers. It was impossible not to be distracted by what the contents might represent. Vittoria hadn’t exactly been warm or sincere with her birthday wishes, and yet she claimed friendship with both B  renger, the love of her life, and Destino, her trusted teacher.

Once the final book had been signed, Maureen rushed to the awaiting Town Car, which would take her back to Fifth Avenue. She used the nail scissors in her purse to cut open the top of the envelope. Carefully she extracted what appeared to be a doubled-up newspaper. She unfolded it to discover that it was an advance copy of a British tabloid, due to go on sale in the morning, judging by the date. The headline screamed:

Vittoria Declares: Sinclair Oil Heir Is the Father of My Baby!

A photograph splashed across the remainder of the front page. It depicted Vittoria, wrapped in the arms of B  renger Sinclair.



“It’s a lie, Maureen.”

Maureen tried not to cry over the transatlantic connection as she explained the deeply upsetting events of her birthday to B  renger. He denied everything.

“I know Vittoria, but I did not sleep with her. And you may not believe this, but I have no desire to do so. I love *you*. I want to be with *you*.”

Maureen sighed, still holding back the tears. “That may be true *now*. But we were separated for a long time ...”

“We were separated because you requested it. I gave you that space—and waited for you.”

Maureen couldn’t argue that point. She had been the stubborn one, determined to keep B  renger at a safe distance in the early days of their relationship. Then, she was still afraid of the powerful bond that was building

between them. It threatened to overwhelm her, and she bolted. They were apart for almost a year.

“The timing is perfect in terms of the age of that child,” she continued. “He would have been conceived when you and I were separated.”

Bérenger snapped with the stress, more than he meant to. This revelation of Vittoria’s had blindsided him and he was still reeling from the shock. “You are so ready to condemn me over this, even though I am telling you as emphatically as I can that Vittoria means nothing to me and never will. *You* are the only woman in the world for me. The love of my life. My heart and soul.”

“What about the photos on the cover of the *News of the World*? And the *Daily Mail*?”

Bérenger answered with exaggerated patience. “First of all, there is only one photo, and I am *hugging* her in it. I am not having sex with her. It was taken in Cannes in front of about five hundred people. I was there with my brother representing the family’s interests in an independent film about Scotland’s mystical heritage. Vittoria was there too; our families are long acquainted. She’s bloodline.”

“She’s *what*?”

“Didn’t you know? Vittoria is a bloodline princess. Her mother is an Austrian baroness, from the Hapsburg lineage. The baroness was the one who secured my access to the museum in Austria for my research on the Spear of Destiny. Her father is of the Buondelmonti, an ancient and very wealthy family, originally from Tuscany. Vittoria and I have run in the same esoteric and social circles in Europe.”

His explanation just made things worse. Much worse. Not only was Vittoria one of the world’s most beautiful women, she was also the daughter of a fascinating noble heritage. Both sides of her family belonged to bloodlines that claimed descent from the union between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Not incidentally, these families—including the Sinclairs—were some of the wealthiest and most influential in the world. Bérenger and Vittoria had more in common than not. The fact made Maureen feel like a common outsider.

“Vittoria claims to know Destino.” It was gut-wrenching to think that this woman had a claim on Maureen’s beloved teacher too.

“That’s entirely possible. I didn’t know about Destino when I last saw her, so I can’t tell you that. Maureen, listen to me. I have had no contact with Vittoria since that photo was taken, which leaves us with several important

questions.”

“Which are?”

“Why is she lying about this? And why did she make such a show out of coming personally to you?” Béranger paused for a moment, and Maureen could hear him breathe heavily as he thought about it. He continued.

“I don’t know the answer to either of those questions, but I swear to you, I will find them as soon as I can. And I am so sorry that you have been dragged into this. But in the meantime, I need you to believe in me. I love you. And I’m not going to let anything come between us, and I pray that you won’t either.”

“Okay.” Maureen whispered the weak reply. She was exhausted and hurt by the events of her birthday and needed time to think. The following afternoon on the airplane, she would torment herself all the way across the Atlantic with possible scenarios, most which featured the love of her life entangled in the impossibly long legs of the world’s most sultry supermodel.

*Headquarters of the Confraternity of the Holy Apparition
Vatican City
present day*

FELICITY DE PAZZI gritted her teeth as she drove the sharpened nail deeper into her left palm. It was bleeding more profusely now, which would give her the dried crust and the scabbing she would need tonight. Timing was everything with the stigmata. They required a few hours to scab over, so that the wounds would bleed anew when she ripped them open during her public appearance. The left hand would need an hour or so before she could wrap it and begin the process of impalement on the right hand.

Felicity saw the first traces of stigmata when she was in school back in England. She had been having visions more regularly, falling to the ground in ecstasies when the Holy Spirit would take over her body.

The headmistress, however, was neither convinced nor amused by what she referred to as Felicity’s fits. It was after she had been sent to counseling and was being threatened with expulsion that the stigmata first made themselves known.

On the day that the bloody wounds began to appear in Felicity’s palms, she wept with the joy of it. Finally, here was physical proof that she was born to be God’s instrument. Everyone would be forced to believe her now; how could they deny it? It was there for anyone with eyes.

And yet, when Felicity showed her classmates, the headmistress, and subsequently the counselor, they all looked at her with a mixture of pity and

horror. No one was able to see her stigmata.

Felicity was devastated at first and sobbed until she choked with the violence of her rage and disappointment. How could God have betrayed her so? How was it possible that she saw the wounds of Christ so clearly on her own hands, but the others did not?

And in the darkest hour of her most agonizing night, Felicity understood. The people around her were mostly godless; they were certainly not gifted with the holy sight as she was. Of course they could not see a vision of something so sacred that it was bestowed upon her specifically by her Lord Jesus Christ. It was her own special gift, shared between her and her savior. And yet these common people were the ones she would have to reach if she was going to assume her place as the Lord's special child. And it was in that realization that she knew what she would have to do.

She would have to help the ignorant masses to see the bleeding wounds left by sharpened iron nails so that there would be no further doubt from any of them.

Felicity began that night in the bathroom of her dormitory. She did not have access to any nails immediately, so instead she stole the blade from a razor out of the toiletry kit belonging to one of her roommates. The razor wasn't optimum as it required some work and artistry to create the look of a hole left by a nail, but she made decent work of it. Unfortunately, she also fainted in the first attempt. This led to her expulsion from the school, followed by her hasty return to her family in Italy.

She had perfected her technique now, after more than ten years of practice, perfected all of it. When she appeared before the growing crowds who were coming to see her, the passion poured from her and she commanded the attention of all in the room without fail. When she spoke as herself, she was charismatic and convincing. Fanatical, yes, but it was hard to turn away from her if you were inclined to believe that God was to be feared and that there was limited time to be saved. But it was when she spoke directly to the Holy Spirit that the drama began, making her infamous throughout Rome and causing lines to form at the door of the confraternity for hours before the meetings began. It was when she engaged the Holy Spirit that Felicity fell to the ground and writhed horribly, when the stigmata opened in her hands and began to bleed. At other times, the voice of Santa Felicita herself poured from her in a type of ecstatic possession.

There were even a number within the confraternity who referred to her as Saint Felicity, so convinced were they that this little prophetess was the true messenger of God.

Felicity, now expert in what it took to gain the attention of those who came to hear her, could manipulate a crowd within minutes. And she knew just how to make the ragged holes in her flesh so that the godless ones could finally understand how she suffered with her visions. For Felicity, this suffering was all-important. To be a prophetess for God was the task of a martyr, one that required agony and constant penitence. It was only through mortification of the flesh, total chastity, and an absolute commitment to the physical experience of suffering that one could be certain that the visions were pure.

People needed to understand just how much pain was required to hear God clearly.

*Paris
present day*

MAUREEN MET TAMMY at her hotel in Paris, a quiet little boutique inn that was Maureen's home in the French capital. She loved this hotel, which existed in what was once an outbuilding on the eastern edge of the Louvre palace complex. It was charming, untouristed, and within walking distance to nearly anything that mattered to her.

With the picture windows of her hotel room open, the gargoyles appeared to be jumping from the neighboring medieval church and into the room. Each gargoyle had a unique personality—some fierce, some comical. All of them were her friends, and she felt strangely protected by them as she slept under their gaze. The alley that separated the buildings was so narrow that she could very nearly reach out and touch her Gothic watchdogs. This was Maureen's favorite feature of the rooms on this side of the hotel.

She sat on the bed on the afternoon of her arrival, looking out the window at a springtime shower in Paris. She was waiting for Tammy, who was in the adjacent room, getting dressed.

When it rained, the gargoyles spit. Maureen marveled at the engineering of the medieval architects who created the gargoyles not as decoration but as drainage systems. The drainpipes flowed from the roof, with openings to expel the rain that ran through the gargoyle sculptures and ended in their gaping mouths. She had learned that the word *gargoyle*, from the French, was related to *gargouille*, which meant "gullet."

The knock at the door startled her, and she rose to let Tammy in.

Tammy was clutching a file folder in her hand as she strolled gracefully through the door. Her long black hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and she was dressed casually today in jeans and a

white T-shirt that spelled out in black letters Heresy Begins with HER. The two women could not have been more different: Tamara Wisdom, the statuesque, olive-skinned beauty who was brash, outspoken, and vivacious; Maureen, the fair-skinned redhead who, while feisty in her Irish way, was more reserved in her expression. But spiritually, they were sisters of the highest order who shared a great love, both for their work and for each other.

“Do you want to talk about B  renger first?” Tammy was never one to mince words or avoid conflict. “Because I have a perspective.”

“I’m sure you do, and I’m guessing it’s his.”

Tammy and Roland lived at the ch  teau with B  renger, and they considered one another to be family. She was fiercely protective of B  renger, as he had been extremely generous with her, financially and spiritually, throughout their friendship. It was rare when she didn’t defend him, which is exactly what Maureen was expecting from her now.

“Stop it. He loves you. And only you. Totally, eternally, completely. You *know* that. God made you for each other, and you know that too. If he slept with Vittoria during the time when you two weren’t together, so what? He’s a man and a healthy one. It happens.”

Maureen considered this for a moment. “Yes, but ... he *loved me* at the time he did this. If it had happened before we met, I could accept it easily. But he was already certain I was his soul mate, said repeatedly that I was the only woman he would ever want. Apparently he forgot to mention the exception about Italian supermodels.”

“You hurt him, Maureen, remember? You insisted on separation from him, and he was destroyed when you did.”

“Uh-huh. He was so destroyed that he fathered a child with Vittoria during those months apart as an act of consolation. Must be a European custom I am unfamiliar with.”

Tammy looked annoyed. “He made a mistake. And there’s a child as a result of that mistake, which isn’t the kid’s fault.”

Maureen shook her head, “No, of course it isn’t. If the baby is B  renger’s, he needs to take responsibility for it and be a father to him.”

“And what are you going to do?”

Maureen shook her head. “It depends on what B  renger does. He is denying that he ever slept with Vittoria at all, but I don’t believe it. I know him too well and I can tell when he is lying to me. I would rather he was

honest and just owned up to his mistake. And incidentally, why would Vittoria lie about it?”

“Are you kidding? I can think of over a billion reasons why she would lie about it.”

Maureen shook her head. “She’s an heiress on both sides, and she has a career that pays well on top of that. Money isn’t her motivation. And if you had seen her ... I can’t explain it, Tammy, but there was something in the way she looked at me when she delivered that envelope. It wasn’t evil, exactly, but it was the look of a woman who was very determined to accomplish a mission. And at that moment, hurting me was her only mission. Otherwise, why choose my birthday and a very public place to make her appearance?”

“That bitch,” Tammy snapped. “I’m so sorry you had to endure that. But you’re right, it was carefully calculated. Sounds like jealousy to me. Half the socialites in Europe despise you for snagging B  renger out from under them. Don’t take it too personally.”

“I’m trying not to ...” Maureen stopped midsentence when she noticed that a strange look had come over Tammy’s face. Without another word, Tammy dashed past Maureen and into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Maureen could hear Tammy retching, suddenly and violently. Worried, Maureen knocked after a moment.

“You okay?”

She heard the water running and shortly thereafter Tammy emerged, face wet.

“What is it the old wives say when they tell their tales? That the sicker you are, the more likely it is to be a boy? Or is it a girl? I can never remember.”

Maureen screamed and threw her arms around her friend.

“Why didn’t you tell me!”

“The timing didn’t seem to be so great. I didn’t think the word *baby* was one you needed to hear at the moment. But ... I am telling you now.”

The two women embraced warmly as Maureen showered Tammy with questions, which she answered patiently. Yes, she and Roland were extremely happy even though the pregnancy was unplanned and unexpected. Yes, B  renger knew and he had been instructed not to say a word to Maureen, which was killing him, but Tammy had wanted to tell her in person. And yes, Tammy felt this sick pretty much all the time but hoped that once she entered her second trimester, she would feel better.

And yes, they had a wedding to plan for the early summer, before Tammy got too big to wear a suitably fabulous dress.



Maureen left Tammy in the hotel to nap and walked up the Rue de Rivoli in the rain. She passed the Louvre and the souvenir shops on her way toward the hallowed, book-filled halls of Galignani. The first English-speaking bookstore established on the Continent, in 1801, Galignani had been Maureen's literary addiction since her first visit to Paris as a teenager. Here she was able to find treasure within pages devoted to great European characters throughout history, often coming across rare jewels for research that were unavailable to her in American bookstores.

As she approached Galignani, Maureen pulled up short with a little, involuntary squeal. There in the window of the most elegant English-speaking bookstore in continental Europe was the British edition of her latest book, *The Time Returns*. Her own novel was on a shelf adjacent to an annotated version of *The Collected Works of Alexandre Dumas*, and just below Emily Brontë's romantic masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*. Hoping that the rain would mask her unexpected tears, she stood before the window for another minute to take it all in. To be on a shelf with Dumas and Brontë in this place ... well, it was more than she could ask for, the perfect realization of her dream to become an author since she won her first writing competition as a child. Dumas was one of her literary heroes; Maureen had cut her teeth on the adventures of D'Artagnan and the Musketeers, the Count of Monte Cristo, and the unfortunate Man in the Iron Mask. And Emily Brontë had made her weep for hours at a time, as she had so many young women since the publication of her classic romance. Maureen had even memorized pieces of the heart-wrenching story of Heathcliff and Cathy, wondering if that kind of undying and epic passion could ever really exist in the modern world we live in.

He shall never know how I love him ... because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same... . He's always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure ... but as my own being... . Haunt me, drive me mad... . Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! ... I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!

So beautiful, yet so heartbreaking. Why was love so often accompanied by pain? Why were the tragic romances the ones that we remembered and cherished above all others? It was the star-crossed who resonated somewhere in the deepest places of our spirit.

Maureen had the briefest vision then of B  renger Sinclair’s aristocratic face, accompanied by the fleeting knowledge of something more, something about the past and a promise, something sacred and eternal.

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same ...

“Yes, they are,” she whispered to herself. That was the one thing of which she was certain. No matter what B  renger may have done in the past, she knew with all her heart and soul that he loved her and that she loved him. This would be her challenge, and she knew it: could she allow love to matter above and beyond the challenges that they were going to face in the spotlight of this new scandal?

She closed her umbrella and turned her own face up to the sky, allowing the light rain to come down on her for a moment. There were times in our lives when we simply needed to surrender to the power of something that is greater than our limited humanity. God had a plan, and he was kind enough in his love and grace to give Maureen signs along the way that she was on the right track. Today was one of those days, and this was one of those moments that kept her going when faith in many things still so unknown and unknowable was all she had.

“Thank you,” she whispered up to the sky, as a ray of sun broke through the clouds. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but it appeared to specifically illuminate the cover of her book about love, where it sat in the window on a Parisian street.

*Ch  teau des Pommes Bleues
Arques, France
present day*

THE SPEAR OF DESTINY.

It was the legendary weapon of Longinus the Centurion, used to pierce the side of the crucified Christ. B  renger Sinclair had devoted a portion of his library to this artifact, as it had obsessed him since he was a teenager. He possessed every book that had ever been written about it in multiple languages, had participated in research teams to authenticate items that claimed to be authentic pieces of the spear, and even had multiple replicas created and displayed.

It was one of the greatest legends in Christian history, and now he had a chance to go directly to the source to find the truth. Destino could tell him what had happened to the real Spear of Destiny. But would he divulge such a secret after all this time?

The spear had become an object of questing through history, in the same

category as the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant, only the spear was believed to have extreme powers of negative influence; some even said that it was possessed by an evil demon. Evil or not, it was coveted by military leaders who believed that ownership of the weapon would bring them victory in their battles. Legend claimed that Charlemagne had used the spear as his secret talisman to win more than forty battles, until the greatest of all European emperors dropped the spear on the battlefield during his forty-eighth skirmish. It was lost to him underfoot in the melee. It was a fatal loss, as Charlemagne died in that same battle. His fate enhanced the legendary status of the great artifact. It was now understood that possession of the Spear of Destiny could lead to unlimited victory, even conquest of the world. But to lose it would prove fatal to the man who allowed it to slip through his hands.

Most famously, Adolf Hitler had coveted the spear and had been committed to obtaining it for the Nazis. Hitler told a story about viewing the artifact for the first time while visiting the Hofburg Imperial Palace in Austria. He was literally entranced by it, feeling as if he were losing consciousness as the power of the spear reached out to him. Hitler had been quoted as saying, "I felt as though I myself had held it before in some earlier century of history. That I myself had once claimed it as my talisman of power and held the destiny of the world in my hands."

Following that experience, Adolf Hitler had become obsessed with the Spear of Destiny. He believed that possession of it was necessary for him to succeed in his goals of domination. Some said that acquiring the spear was his single greatest personal fixation. Immediately after bringing Austria under Nazi control in 1938, Hitler demanded that the spear be brought to him in Nuremberg. As the Allies gained ground in Europe, he had the spear moved into an underground bunker built specifically to protect it and the rest of his collection of artifacts. In 1945, American forces took control of the bunker and confiscated the Spear of Destiny. Within two hours, Adolf Hitler was dead.

The American military leader of the time General George Patton became convinced that the power of the spear was real, and he studied it in depth, tracing its history and telling its tales. He even wrote poetry about it. But the Spear of Destiny was eventually returned with the rest of the Hofburg collection to the museum in Austria, where it remained.

Bérenger Sinclair had been part of a research team in Vienna that worked to evaluate the age and authenticity of the Spear of Destiny in the Hofburg collection a decade earlier. That research had been financed by Vittoria Buondelmonti's mother, the Baroness von Hapsburg, who had also secured Bérenger's participation on the team alongside her daughter. It was where

they first met; in fact Bérenger and Vittoria had become quite close during that summer in Austria. Despite the twenty-year age difference between the young beauty and the Scottish oil billionaire, Vittoria's family was more than eager to broker a wedding between the two. It was a match made in secret society heaven, one which would combine the wealthiest and most pristine bloodlines—and help to contain some of the deepest held secrets—in Europe. Further, there was real compatibility between Bérenger and Vittoria, at least on the surface. She was deeply immersed in the research and they shared a passion for religious artifacts and their potential application to family histories.

There had been high drama around the results of the scientific testing, as it was ultimately determined that the Hofburg spear was not old enough to be the authentic weapon once wielded by Longinus the Centurion. The metal could not have been forged prior to the seventh century. No one was more bitterly disappointed than the baroness herself, who held it as a point of honor that the Hapsburgs had been in possession of this spear for hundreds of years. Bérenger remembered that Vittoria had been emotional about the results as well; she had wept when it was determined that the Hofburg spear was a fake at worst, a replica at best.

When the research project had ended, Bérenger returned to France and Vittoria to Italy. He had no interest in pursuing a relationship with the girl, as that was what she was—a girl. He appreciated her beauty and spirit, but she was half his age at that time. He had watched with interest as her career in the fashion industry catapulted her to the covers of magazines worldwide, but he did not see her again until that fateful meeting in Cannes almost three years ago.

He was thinking about that encounter as his phone rang.

“What the hell are you playing at, Vittoria?” Bérenger snapped as he recognized the phone number. He had been trying to get her on the line for hours and had barraged her with messages since his upsetting conversation with Maureen.

“I’m not playing at anything. It’s true. Dante is your son.”

“I am not an idiot. The dates don’t match. He was born on the first of January, two years ago. The last time you and I were together was that previous May in Cannes. Nice effort, but it doesn’t add up. It means you were already pregnant when you seduced me.”

Vittoria clucked at him, completely unfazed. “Seduced you? Come now, Bérenger. You make it sound like it was a strategy, an effort. Difficult even. Don’t pretend there hasn’t always been chemistry with us.”

“Stop avoiding the issue. Dante was born too early to be my son.”

“You’re right about one thing. Dante was born early. He was premature. I have the birth certificate that proves it by showing his birth weight at four pounds. But the real proof will come when you see him, Bérenger. There’s not a person with eyes who would not recognize the Sinclair blood in this child instantly. I have protected you from it for as long as I can. But he is getting older and he will begin asking questions about his father. It was time for you to know, and for him.”

“Then why didn’t you come to me in a civilized way? Why drag Maureen into this? Do you have any idea what you have done to her?”

Vittoria sniffed. “*She* is the reason I did it this way. I did you a favor. She is all wrong for you, Bérenger. She isn’t like us. She wasn’t born to the life and world that we share. You and I are the same. We belong together.” She lowered her voice to a purr. “If you remember, we have had some very good times. My family adores you and always hoped we would marry. There is no reason we can’t try to make this work and raise Dante together.”

“There is a very good reason. I’m in love with somebody else, regardless of what you think of her, and I will never let her go. Vittoria, if Dante is my son, I will take responsibility for him. But you are going to have to prove it. I want DNA tests, and I want them outside of Italy.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason you want to have them within Italy. Results can be bought. And in Italy, your family can buy anything.”

“I don’t need to buy results. I know Dante is your son and I will prove it. But when I do, Bérenger, what then? Has it occurred to you that a child of ours brings all three of the holy bloodlines together? Hapsburg, Buondelmonti, Sinclair. Our son has the bluest blood in Europe at this moment in time.”

Bérenger stopped, momentarily speechless at the potential implication. He asked his next question carefully. “What are you saying? Are you telling me that this was intentional? That you set out to create a child who would combine our bloodlines?”

“Stop pretending you didn’t enjoy it. You weren’t exactly complaining at the time of conception. Think, Bérenger, think. Dante is a very special child. He is both beautiful and brilliant. And he is a prince.”

She waited for a moment before delivering her final piece of news. “In

fact, he is a Poet Prince. That is why I named him Dante, after our great Tuscan poet. Check your mail, Béranger. I sent you something via FedEx from New York. Call me after you've had a chance to look at it."

Béranger was rarely speechless, but Vittoria had stunned him into silence with this final piece of news. She lowered her voice to the honey-dripping growl that the Italian media devoured. "You do know what that means, don't you, my darling? A Poet Prince who is the son of another?"

She did not pause long enough for him to answer. "Now if you will excuse me, I have to go and feed *our* son, whom you may hear shrieking in the background. He may look like a Sinclair, but in terms of temper, he is all Buondelmonti—and every inch a prince."



Béranger sat in his study with his closest friend, Roland Gelis. Roland loved Béranger like a brother, but he was clearly irritated with him as he ran one giant hand across his forehead in exasperation. "So in addition to everything else happening here, you lied to Maureen."

Béranger nodded lamely. God, he hated this.

"Why?"

"Why? Because I love her beyond reason and I am terrified of losing her. I knew that the dates couldn't match and the child was born too early to be my son. So because I was certain that DNA would vindicate my position, I decided that the best strategy to take with Maureen was to tell her I never had sex with Vittoria. She didn't need to know if it couldn't be proven. It would hurt her unnecessarily. Besides, now we are solid, together, and I will never cheat on her again. Never."

"But you did have sex with Vittoria."

"Yes. And ... if she is telling the truth about Dante being premature, then he could actually be mine. She says he looks just like me, but I haven't seen photos yet. No doubt Vittoria is saving photos as one of her aces with the press. God only knows when and where those will surface."

Roland glared at his friend as he gestured to the table. "And now ... we have this to deal with."

Laid out between the two of them on the study table were the contents of Vittoria's FedEx package. It contained the birth certificate confirming the baby's low birth weight, ostensibly from premature arrival, and an astrological chart for the baby with an analysis attached. Béranger cringed

when he saw the heading at the top of the page: “Birth Information for Dante Buondelmonti Sinclair.”

The two men read through the results again. Within the ancient prophecies of the Order, the astrological qualifications for a Poet Prince were specified:

*He who is a spirit of earth and water born
within the complex realm of the sea goat
and the bloodline of the blessed.*

*He who will submerge the influence of Mars
And exalt the influence of Venus.
To embody grace over aggression.*

According to this document, if anything from Vittoria was to be believed, Dante fulfilled every requirement of the prophecy in exactly the same way that Bérenger did. He was born under the astrological sign of Capricorn, the sea goat, and his chart was a mixture of earth and water elements. The planet Mars was “submerged” in the water sign of Pisces, and Venus was in an “exalted” position at the time of Dante’s birth. And he was born on the first day of January, as was the greatest of all known Poet Princes—Lorenzo de’ Medici.

“Bérenger, I don’t have to tell you how serious this is. You are a servant of the Grail. You cannot ignore this, no matter what it costs you personally.”

Bérenger Sinclair shook his head miserably. He could not possibly ignore a child of his own blood under any circumstances. But if Dante indeed proved to be his son and if this birth chart accurately reflected the position of the planets when the baby was born, matters were complicated in a new and unexpected way. Bérenger Sinclair was the heir to more than a huge oil empire; he was also the heir to a powerful spiritual tradition that dated back to Jesus and Mary Magdalene and ran through the greatest families in European history. His devotion to the teachings of the bloodline was absolute, and he had sworn to protect and defend those traditions with his life when he took the vows of a Grail knight under the guidance of his grandfather. It was a vow he had taken in this very castle as he knelt beside Roland when they were both teenagers.

If baby Dante was a child of this prophecy, Bérenger would need to be actively involved with raising the boy to fulfill his promise. His involvement would be a moral and spiritual imperative.

Was it possible that he was being asked to make the sacrifice of his own happiness in order to do the right thing? He wasn’t even sure he knew what the right thing was at this point. But the churning in his stomach was leading him to a wretched realization: that it was quite possibly his duty to marry

Vittoria and raise Dante to fulfill his destiny as a Poet Prince.

Because there was one more thing at play here that had not been discussed—an element that Vittoria was clearly aware of and that Bérénger feared more than anything else. There was a second part to the prophecy of the Poet Prince, an additional prediction about how the future of mankind rested upon the shoulders of this little boy—and upon Bérénger Sinclair.

Bérénger didn't have time to contemplate the wretched possibility further, as his phone rang. He instantly recognized the number of his family seat in Scotland and picked up the phone.

*The Marais district
Paris
present day*

THE CARD WAS standard-issue Destino—the stationery he preferred was embossed with the A&E design in celebration of Asherah and El—as was the message, which was something of a riddle. In a scrawling hand the Master had written

Are you as wise as Solomon?

*If so, the Golden Age awaits you. Come to Florence, one and all,
while the Primavera is at its most beautiful.*

Come one and all, he said. Peter had no doubt that his cousin, Maureen, and all her comrades in this grand adventure that life had become would heed Destino's call. Maureen's role was clear and central, and Bérénger's as well. They had much to explore together and separately about their destinies. Each was the child of an ancient prophecy in a modern world; each had a great desire to unveil the truth and improve the state of humanity through their work. Tammy and Roland shared those passions, and the four of them had become a dynamic force of research and exploration together.

But Peter was still a little uncertain where he belonged in this adventure.

Destino, in his remarkably intuitive way, addressed Peter individually in the next line, knowing that he might need additional encouragement to join in this particular gathering.

*Come, Peter, and walk in the footsteps of Lorenzo, and see where
his path may take you.*

Where, indeed, would his path take him?

His life had changed drastically in the last two years, and he was still in a state of uncertainty. After a lifetime devoted to his work in the Church and as a teaching Jesuit, Peter was now a refugee from the Vatican. Two years

earlier, he and a small team of Italian cardinals had stolen the Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene from the vaults of their own Church. They feared that the current forces in Rome would attempt to discredit Mary Magdalene's gospel or, worse, try to destroy it. Peter had been present when it was discovered and was the first to translate it. He knew it was authentic and he knew what it contained. Most of all, he understood exactly what Maureen had endured to discover the gospel and bring its message of love and forgiveness to the world. In good conscience he could not stand by and allow yet another cover-up, not as long as he was physically capable of doing something to stop it. So he took a vow to preserve the truth no matter the cost, as did the other men who joined him.

And it cost them plenty.

Peter had spent eighteen months in a French prison for grand theft. His companions in the crime, much older men whom Peter revered, did only six months; Peter had agreed to take the harshest charges solely upon himself to save the others. The sentences had been much heavier initially. There had been intense negotiating, and perhaps a little bit of implied blackmail, to reduce their punishment. Peter knew where quite a few bodies were buried around Vatican City. And while the Church had been determined to make him pay for his crime, it ultimately did not dare to push him too far. Most important, the Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene was safe, currently under the quiet protection of a family in Belgium with ties to the Order going back a thousand years.

Since his release from prison, Peter had spent the last six months working to help Maureen and Béranger as a researcher while they continued on their quest to uncover and preserve the truth of the lost teachings of Jesus. He had thrown himself into this task, playing watchdog for Maureen in preparation for the release of the controversial new book. He smiled as he thought of his cousin, who was more like a sister to him. She was sometimes so naïve. Did she think she would really get away with publishing a book that claimed to contain secret teachings of Jesus and not feel the repercussions? It was at times one of the things that he loved most about her: she was so singularly dedicated to telling the truth, no other option ever occurred to her. Maureen wasn't capable of comprehending why someone would find such teachings to be dangerous or offensive. They were beautiful lessons about love, faith, and community. Why would anyone find those ideas harmful?

Why indeed. But Peter had been a priest all his adult life, and he knew the answer personally and viscerally in a way that Maureen could never fully grasp: because those ideas challenged more established values. They

represented a potential earthquake that could serve to tear down two thousand years of empire founded on money, power, politics, superstition, ego. And Maureen's work threatened everyone who had a stake in such institutions—institutions like the Vatican.

As a result, Maureen was threatened, far more than she even knew herself. Peter had tracked nineteen separate death threats against her just in the last six months. Most appeared to be hoaxes without merit, but there were a few that needed further investigation.

He was relieved that she was on her way here, happier still that they would likely all be heading off to Florence together. If Maureen was flanked at all times by Peter and B  renger, chances were they would have an easier time keeping her safe. And while the greatest threats seemed to be coming from the United States at the moment, Maureen was never really safe in Italy, and everyone knew that.

Peter had the television tuned to the CNN broadcast in English. He had not been paying much attention to it until he heard the commentator utter the name "Sinclair." Looking up, he saw video footage of a man in handcuffs being led away from what appeared to be an elegant office building.

"It has been a difficult week for the Sinclair Oil family in Scotland," the announcer said. "Today Alexander Sinclair, the president of Sinclair Oil, was arrested on charges of corruption in the United Kingdom. This is a breaking story and details regarding the alleged criminal activity are scarce. We will fill you in as we follow this one. You may remember that the elder of the Sinclair brothers, B  renger, found himself in hot water yesterday when Italian supermodel Vittoria Buondelmonti announced that he was the father of her baby boy."

Peter couldn't move for a moment; he was stunned. B  renger worshipped Maureen, would die for her. Or so he had thought. Peter, who had committed to a life of celibacy, didn't always understand the affairs of men in such matters. He had his cell phone in his hands within seconds, but he could not reach Maureen. He tried B  renger next, but the call went immediately to voice mail.

He went to pick up Destino's invitation again, contemplating the question "Are you as wise as Solomon?" His immediate answer was an unqualified no. At times like this, he was at a loss about what to do and how to be of help to the people he loved. The priesthood had not prepared him for many of life's most complicated problems, including those surrounding relationships and sexuality.

But Peter also knew that where Destino was concerned, every question

was a trick question.

The Confraternity of the Holy Apparition
Vatican City
present day

“THE HOLY VIRGIN Mother allowed her only child to die in pain! And he died for all of you, in that pain!”

Felicity screeched at the packed crowd in the confraternity’s meeting hall. There was higher attendance tonight than there had ever been. It was so full that the confraternity had to turn people away for fear that the fire brigade would come and shut down the meeting. She extended an arm and pointed at the assembly. “How many of you would do the same? How many of you would suffer for God?”

There was no time for audience response. As Felicity screamed the last question, her eyes began to roll back in her head. The crowd was silent, waiting to see what would happen next. This was what they had come to see—this great drama of possession by the saints and the Holy Spirit.

Felicity began to babble in a strange, harsh type of gibberish.

“She’s speaking in tongues!” someone shouted in the crowd but was hushed by the rest, who waited for what would come next. In their anticipation of the spectacle, no one noticed that the voice came from Sister Ursula, the elder nun responsible for the Confraternity of the Holy Apparition. She, alongside Felicity, had resurrected the organization after Girolamo de Pazzi proved incapable following his illness. Sister Ursula had been Felicity’s guardian since the day she returned to Italy. She had protected the girl and nourished her visions under careful supervision for a decade now. At the public appearances, she played a key role in ensuring that the crowd was steered in the right emotional direction. Other members of the confraternity were well placed in the room for the same purpose.

A visceral growl rose from Felicity’s throat, followed by a scream so heart-wrenching and full of agony that it rattled the windows of the meeting hall.

“My children!” she wailed again, and the excitement within the hall was growing. Here is what they came for, here was the arrival of the holy Santa Felicita, speaking through the vessel she had chosen for her message.

“My children did not die in vain! I gave my children to God as sacrifices to his holy name. Each one suffered and bled for the honor of being martyred to the name of Jesus Christ!”

She fell to her knees, wailing, ripping her hair out now from the scalp as she continued her tirade.

“Mothers among you, do you weep for me?”

There were murmurs and cries through the crowd of “Yes! Of course!” and “God bless you!”

“Do not!” she roared at them all. “I was joyous on the day that my brave children chose to suffer rather than deny their God. Like the Virgin Mother before me, I was in rapture over the death of my sons. My children will live forever!”

Felicity’s eyes rolled back again and she fell to the ground, thrashing. Her back arched and her hand came down hard on the cement floor, splitting open the wounds of her stigmata. The crowd gasped as droplets of blood splashed those who were nearest to her. When her thrashing died down, she was possessed with a new voice.

“All of you, you must begin your preparation. Think no more about this earthly life, which means nothing! The afterlife is far greater than anything you can imagine on this terrible earth.”

Sister Ursula cried out, “It is the voice of the Holy Spirit. Praise God for this blessing. Praise God for this saint who suffers for us!”

The crowd was with her now, caught up in the frenzied atmosphere that had followed Santa Felicita. They began to shout out, “Praise God! Praise his saints!”

Felicity rolled over on one side, exhausted and bleeding now, but still preaching in her strange growl.

“You may preserve your place in heaven, but you must show God that you are worthy. You must defend him and his holy truth. All of you who fight to defeat evil and destroy blasphemy will be given your reward. But there is a great evil which threatens our holy way, a heresy which must be stopped ...”

The energy was seeping from her as she prepared to leave consciousness and faint into blackness. She whispered, just before her head rolled back, “Stop the blasphemer. Stop the fornicators who would lie about the chastity of our Lord. You must ... stop ...”

Felicity lapsed into unconsciousness before she could finish her sentence. Members of the confraternity, well rehearsed in this circumstance, brought a stretcher to the front of the room and carried her out amid the frenzy and excitement that remained in the room.

Sister Ursula seized the moment and grabbed the microphone from the

podium at the front of the room.

“My brothers and sisters, do not leave without understanding the warning which was given us by the Holy Spirit! There is a great blasphemy which threatens us, an evil, a demon of lies and deceit which must be destroyed.”

On cue, a group of volunteers from the confraternity began to hand out leaflets to everyone in attendance as Sister Ursula continued to shout in the microphone over the din.

“I urge you to take this information, and take action! Your place in heaven depends upon it. Stop Satan from spreading more lies! Help us to stamp out the devil! We will be meeting here every night this week to discuss the action plan laid out here for you.”

The leaflets were snatched up greedily by the members in attendance, more motivated than ever to find their way into heaven.

The leaflets bore the bold command “Stop the Blasphemy!”

Below that was a photograph of Maureen Paschal’s new book, *The Time Returns*, and another one of the demon fornicator herself.

*Careggi
spring 1463*

THE SUN WARMED the stones of Careggi to a tawny gold as Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici watched her elder son ride away from the villa. She paused at the window until he rode out of sight, his glossy black hair flying behind him. As if sensing his mother’s gaze, Lorenzo turned in his saddle and waved back at the house with a dazzling smile before cantering off into the forest. At fourteen, Lorenzo had grown into a fine young man. He was tall and well built, athletic, and utterly charming. He was possessed of the rare combination of a brilliant mind and a loving heart, and Lucrezia kept a close watch on his education to ensure that those attributes were both protected and developed.

Lucrezia had grown into a deeply pious woman, although in her own words, “Not a tedious one.” She wrote devotional poetry that sprang from her heart and her spirit, for she was deeply indebted to the Lord for the gifts he had bestowed upon her family. She had embroidered in her own fine hand a quote from Psalm 127, which graced the bedchamber she shared with her husband, Piero.

Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him.

They were indeed, and God’s rewards to her had been bountiful. She had five thriving children: three daughters, Maria, Bianca, and Nannina, each

more beautiful and intelligent than the next, and two utterly remarkable sons. Lorenzo was the elder of the boys and the more like her in appearance and intellect. Lucrezia Tornabuoni was not herself a beautiful woman, but she had a grace and presence that transcended any shallow ideal of physical perfection. She had passed on her most unfortunate family trait to Lorenzo: the scooped nose with the flattened bridge that deprived both of them of a sense of smell and any hope of a singing voice. But Lorenzo had also gained some of her greatest characteristics, including her physical height and regal posture combined with the extraordinary mental acuity that made her the most accomplished of Florentine matriarchs. Intellectually, Lorenzo was unequaled by any child she had ever seen. His love of learning was unsurpassed, his linguistic skills were nearly supernatural, and his ability to memorize and comprehend the most complex lessons was astonishing. His first teacher, the renowned intellectual Gentile Becchi, once said that “there were not enough superlatives to describe Lorenzo as a scholar.”

Like his mother, Lorenzo was also possessed of an extraordinary charisma that overcame any of his physical deficits. There was an animation to his face, born from his sheer passion for life, that was entirely enchanting. He was immensely popular among the otherwise cynical people of Florence, who referred to him fondly as “our prince.” Even at this young age, Lorenzo had already carried out important diplomatic missions for both the family and the Florentine state.

“Mama, where is Lorenzo going?”

The voice from the doorway caused Lucrezia to turn with a smile. Her younger son, Giuliano, four years junior to Lorenzo, was petulant. Tears welled in his huge brown eyes.

“The equerry came to the house to tell Lorenzo that his spoiled horse was restless and would not eat from any hand but his master’s. Lorenzo has gone to feed the beast and give him some exercise.”

“He said he would take me riding today.” Giuliano pouted. “He promised! Why didn’t he take me?”

“I’m sure he will come back for you if he promised. Lorenzo never breaks a promise.” This was the truth. Lorenzo was entirely trustworthy and never broke his word, particularly to his baby brother, whom he doted upon unconditionally.

Lucrezia ruffled the younger boy’s dark curls with affection. Giuliano had been given all the physical blessings of which Lorenzo had been deprived. He was a beautiful child and gifted with a sweet, if overly sensitive, nature. Yet Piero was fond of saying to her in the privacy of their chambers, “God knew

what he was doing when he gave us Lorenzo as our prince. Lorenzo was made for this purpose. Giuliano, on the other hand, will never have the disposition for leadership of any kind. He is too sweet, too soft.”

They would watch Giuliano closely to see if he had a vocation for the Church, which would suit the Medici purposes well on a multitude of levels. Yet while Lucrezia was a key decision maker in the most powerful family in Florence, she was also a devoted mother who wanted her children to find happiness in what was often a harsh world. She would not force Giuliano into the Church but rather allow him to make that decision on his own if he had such a calling. Again, this was the privilege of being second-born and free of the burden of an enormous, looming prophecy. Giuliano would have far more say over his personal destiny than his elder brother. Yet Lucrezia saw Lorenzo more clearly than did his father, which frightened her sometimes. She recognized the tender heart beneath the sense of responsibility; she saw and understood that there was truly a delicate poet beneath the powerful prince. While God had a plan for Lorenzo, Lucrezia feared for his happiness. Would he be able to fulfill the role of Medici ruler, of banker, politician, and statesman—and find peace and personal joy in the process?

But above all there was the other responsibility, one that was spoken of only to the most trusted members of their intimate circle: the awesome and daunting holy prophecy that Lorenzo had been chosen by God to fulfill. That he was the Poet Prince was without question from the day of his perfect conception and January birth, under the sign of the sea goat and with Mars submerged in Pisces, just as the Magi had specified. Lorenzo was in the process of becoming fully indoctrinated. Cosimo de’ Medici, the family’s legendary patriarch and Lorenzo’s grandfather, was finalizing that plan with the Order imminently.

Even at such a young age, the weight of his destiny was beginning to settle upon Lorenzo’s broadening shoulders. Cosimo was dying and his heir, Piero, was also unwell, indeed had never been particularly healthy, living up to his unfortunate nickname throughout Florence of Piero the Gouty.

Lucrezia sighed as she ushered Giuliano out the door. Giuliano would never know how fortunate he was to be born into all the privilege with little of the responsibility. But the same could not be said for Lorenzo. *Ah, my poor prince.* She looked toward the window where she had last glimpsed him. *Enjoy your freedom now, my son. Before the reality of who you are and what you must accomplish engulfs you completely.*

Turning back to Giuliano, she grabbed his hand. “Come, my little one. It is time for you to sit with Sandro so that he may finish our beautiful painting. And no squirming this time!”



Lorenzo de' Medici placed the slightest pressure on his heels, urging Morello into a canter. He never kicked or whipped his horses. Indeed, he revered them, and some said he even had the ability to communicate with them. Marsilio Ficino, Cosimo's physician and astrologer, credited Lorenzo's birth chart with this talent. Lorenzo was an earth sign, governed by the mythical sea goat called Capricornus. Ficino said that this sign, combined with other auspicious elements of Lorenzo's chart, gave him an extraordinary affinity for animals, adding that they would figure into his destiny in unexpected ways.

With horses, particularly, Lorenzo was comfortable, and they appeared to return his love. The Medici horses were known to neigh and whinny when they sensed Lorenzo approaching the stables. His favorite mount, the high-spirited Morello, refused to take oats from any hand but Lorenzo's if he so much as sensed the presence of his young master at the family's country retreat here in Careggi.

Urging Morello into the woods, Lorenzo followed a path that he knew well. He had promised to take his little brother riding this afternoon, so he mustn't stay out too long. He knew it would break his brother's heart if he did not keep his promise, and that was something he could not bear. Giuliano worshipped him, and he would not give him any reason to do otherwise. But Lorenzo needed this time alone, to ride in the sun and feel the warmth on his hair, to listen to the sounds of spring coming alive in the forest. He was secretly composing a sonnet to the season, and he wanted to savor it a bit more before he finished his piece. Spring, the season of new beginnings, the time of promise. Florentines celebrated the New Year with the coming of spring, their calendars beginning on the twenty-fifth of March, the Feast of the Annunciation. That was three days away, and Lorenzo would have his sonnet ready for the celebration that was to come.

What was that sound?

He pulled gently on Morello's reins to slow him to a stop and listened. There it was again, a sound on the wind that was unfamiliar in this place. Lorenzo stiffened in his saddle, completely alert now. These were Medici lands, and while he felt safe here most often, a family of such wealth and power had many enemies. He could not be too careful. He heard the sound again—definitely a human sound—but he relaxed a little in his saddle now as he listened. The sound was small and sad, not threatening. Moving Morello slowly toward the noise, he stopped sharply when he heard a gasp.

Sitting in the leaves and looking up at him was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Close to his age, perhaps slightly younger, the girl looked like one of the nymphs that Sandro sketched for him when they discussed the great Greek legends that they both loved so dearly. The most beautiful heart-shaped face, set with delicate features and a perfect Cupid's bow mouth, were framed by a cloud of chestnut-colored ringlets that were streaked with a coppery gold. There were leaves in that hair and her clothing was disheveled, but it was clear that her attire was new and expensive despite her current state of disarray. The girl's eyes were bright with tears that magnified their extraordinary light hazel color. Lorenzo would later come to know that these eyes changed color depending on her mood, sometimes amber, then the lightest sage green. But at that moment, she was the most exquisite mystery.

"Why are you crying?"

She moved to show him that she was holding something, something that fluttered and cooed, scattering white feathers.

"A dove? You have caught a dove?"

"I didn't catch it," she snapped, surprising him with her shift to anger. "I rescued it. It was caught in a trap, up in that tree. But it is injured. I think his wing is broken."

Lorenzo sized up this spirited wood nymph as she stood, holding the dove against her fine-boned frame as she brought it closer for his inspection. That the bird was caught in a poacher's trap was information he would have to turn over to his father later. But there was a more pressing matter at hand. He dismounted gracefully and put his hand on the struggling bird, gently stroking its neck.

"Shh, little one. It's all right."

To the girl's surprise, the bird calmed and allowed Lorenzo to stroke it.

"Lorenzo de' Medici," the nymph said, with a touch of awe in her lyrical voice.

It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard—his name on her lips. "Yes," he said, suddenly and uncharacteristically shy. "But you have an unfair advantage, as you clearly know me and yet I do not know you."

"Everyone in Florence knows you. I saw you during the procession of the Magi, riding that same horse." She paused for a moment before asking, "Will you have me arrested for trespassing on your lands?" She looked most earnest

in her question.

Lorenzo stopped himself from laughing out loud and maintained a most serious demeanor, asking, "And does everyone in Florence say that I am a tyrant?"

"Oh, no! I didn't mean that. It's just that ... oh, I am sorry, Lorenzo. Everyone in Florence says that you are ... magnificent. I just know that my father tells me to stay in our own lands, yet your forest is so much more inviting that I sometimes walk here when no one is watching, and ..."

He interrupted in an effort to alleviate her obvious discomfort. "Would you like to enlighten me as to who your father is?"

"I am a Donati. Lucrezia Donati." She curtsied slightly, while juggling the dove. Clearly, this was a girl of extraordinary breeding.

"Ah. A Donati." He should have guessed by the quality of her attire. The Donati lands backed up to the Medicis', even exceeding their own in terms of usable acreage. They were the nearest thing to royalty in Tuscany, with an illustrious heritage traceable all the way to ancient Rome. The revered Tuscan poet Dante had married a Donati, adding further cachet to that already exalted family name.

"Well, Your Highness." Lorenzo gave a deep bow as he smiled at her. "Given that your family is one of the most aristocratic in this part of Italy, it doesn't appear that this mere Medici has a hope of arresting you. Much as I might like to. Instead, your punishment is to give that dove to me."

"But ... what will you do with it? You won't eat it, will you?"

"Of course I won't eat it! My lord, what must you think of me? I shall take it to Ficino. He is one of my teachers, but also a doctor. He is a maestro, a master of many arts. If anyone can mend this wing, Ficino can. And he lives just over the ridge in Monteverchio, behind our house."

Lucrezia considered him thoughtfully before stating rather than asking, "I'm coming with you. After all, I did go to all of this trouble to fall out of a tree to rescue him. I'd say I deserve to go. Besides, it's my birthday today and you would be terribly cruel to deny me."

Lorenzo laughed again at this spirited, enchanting creature. "Mistress Lucrezia Donati, I doubt that I would ever have the strength to deny you anything. You didn't hurt yourself when you fell from the tree, did you?"

"Not nearly as much as my mother will hurt me when she sees what I have done to my new dress." She brushed at the dirt and the leaves, straightening

herself as she did so. Lorenzo inspected her, using the excuse to circle and take in every inch of her beauty.

“I think you got very lucky this time,” he observed with mock seriousness. “It will brush off and nothing is ripped.” His tone lightened as he added, “And if Mona Donati asks, tell her that your clumsy neighbor Lorenzo de’ Medici fell from his horse and you came to his aid. I will tell my father the same, and everyone will shower you with gifts on your birthday!”

It was Lucrezia’s turn to laugh now, revealing her delicate dimples. “A good plan, Lorenzo, except that you have forgotten one thing. Your skill as an equestrian is legendary, and no one will believe for a moment that you fell from your horse—particularly that horse. No, I must take the blame for what I have done. Besides, I am a terrible liar. Honesty suits me better.”

“Then you are a noble woman in every sense of the word. Can you ride?”

She tossed her chestnut hair and raised her chin at him. “Of course I can ride. Do you think yours is the only family in Florence that educates its daughters?” But the dove flapped in her arms again and she deflated. “Although it may be difficult while holding our little friend.”

Lorenzo devised a solution. He helped Lucrezia up and onto Morello, who was very cooperative. Mounting behind her, he kept his arms around the girl’s shoulders to steady her as she clutched the dove to her body. Together, they rode off slowly in the springtime sun, looking very much the way that teenagers in the throes of a first crush have looked since the beginning of civilization.



Marsilio Ficino watched Lorenzo carefully, if surreptitiously, as he examined the wounded bird. He had been charged with Lorenzo’s intellectual and philosophical well-being since the boy’s infancy, and he knew and loved the boy like his own child. He had never seen him like this, as giddy and self-conscious as he was in the presence of the Donati heiress. At least she was worthy of him and not some farmer’s daughter from Pistoia. On the other hand, this pairing posed its own complications. How would the Donati patriarch feel about his treasured daughter frolicking in the forest with the Medici heir? While Lorenzo’s family was the wealthiest and subsequently the most influential in Florence, they were not nobility. To the regal elite of Italy, the Medici were merchants who had struck it rich, whereas the Donati were of an ancient and storied lineage. Merchant class versus the aristocracy: it was unlikely that the Donati would ever approve of anything beyond the friendship of these children. Perhaps not even that.

“His wing is broken, but I have seen worse,” Ficino declared in his gentle voice. He watched Lucrezia’s face light up at this pronouncement.

“Can he be saved? Can you heal him?”

The hope that radiated from the girl was infectious. Ficino, in spite of himself, was softened by her warmth. He smiled at her.

“It is up to God’s will if the creature is healed, my dear. But we will do our best to use our human skills and see what comes next. Lorenzo, hold him for a moment while I gather some supplies.”

Ficino handed the bird to Lorenzo, who took him gingerly, cooing to the dove all the while. He looked up and caught Lucrezia’s eyes, seeing them bright again with tears. He rushed to reassure her.

“He will be all right, I know he will. The maestro will help him, and you and I ... we will pray together for his healing.”

Ficino returned with two small sticks and some linen strips and bound the bird’s wing to his body. Lorenzo held the dove while his teacher ministered to it, Lucrezia watching both with wide-eyed fascination.

“I will keep him here, but he will need to be fed by hand,” Ficino explained, feigning irritation. “I do not have the time to play nursemaid to this bird, so it will be up to the two of you to be sure that he is fed.”

Lorenzo glanced at Lucrezia, who nodded solemnly. “I will come every day, if I am able.” Her father spent his days in Florence proper, and her mother was lenient with her free-spirited daughter when they were at their country villa. Lucrezia was able to get away on most days, provided she gave her family no cause to worry by staying away too long.

“I will come too,” Lorenzo promised. “I will meet Lucrezia at the edge of her lands and bring her here on Morello.”

Ficino nodded, emitting a grunt. “Good enough. Now away with the two of you, as this old man has work to do. I am translating something of great importance for your grandfather, and his legendary impatience has not been diminished by his illness. And don’t get into any more trouble for today, at least.”

Lorenzo took Lucrezia lightly by the arm and escorted her out the door. “This way,” he whispered.

“Where are we going?”

“Shh. You’ll see.”

He led her along a winding, overgrown path, pushing aside the low tree branches that threatened to obscure the way. But Lorenzo could find this place with his eyes closed. It was his favorite place in the world and would remain so for the rest of his life. They turned a final corner and he escorted her through the opening in a wall.

“What is this place?”

They were on the edge of a large and enclosed circular garden. In the midst of the tangled flowers was a temple in the Greek fashion: a dome supported by columns. In the center was a statue of Cupid mounted on a pillar. A plaque on the pillar carried the motto *Amor vincit omnia*.

“Love conquers all,” Lorenzo translated. “Virgil. The inscription, that is. And ... something else too. But the temple was built by the great Alberti.”

“It’s pagan!” Lucrezia exclaimed, shocked.

“Is it?” Lorenzo laughed. “Come over here.”

Lorenzo took her to one side of the garden, where an altar in stone had been erected. It was the base to a stunning marble crucifixion scene.

“From Master Verrocchio’s hand. Now this is Christian.”

“It’s amazing.” Lucrezia was awestruck. “But ... I don’t understand it.”

Lorenzo smiled at her. It was absolutely forbidden to bring anyone here who was not indoctrinated into the Order, but Lorenzo wanted to share this magical place with her. He knew instinctively that she would learn to love it as he did—and that somehow she belonged here. She was a part of this place just as he was. It was something that he knew, from the first moment he laid eyes on her. She belonged in every place that he loved, at his side.

“Ficino teaches that the wisdom of the ancients and the teachings of our Lord can and should live together in harmony. That all real divine knowledge comes from the same source and should be celebrated together so that we may become better humans. *Anthropos*. That’s a Greek word. It means to become the best human you can be. Similar to *humanitas* in Latin. My grandfather has dedicated his life to that belief, and I hope to do the same thing.”

Lucrezia giggled. “My grandfather would say it is heresy.”

“And my grandfather would say it is harmony. But this is where I come to pray, so it is actually very holy. It is why I brought you here. To pray for our dove. I thought it would be ... appropriate.”

Lucrezia admired the beautiful sculpture before her. She ran one hand

along the cold marble base and up the side of the cross as high as she could reach, then back again. She began to speak but was overcome with shyness suddenly. Lorenzo, who would be acutely attuned to her moods for the rest of his days, noticed. "What is it?"

She looked up at the achingly beautiful face of Our Lord as sculpted by a master artisan. She whispered, "I have dreamed about it."

"About what?"

"The crucifixion. I see it as if I were there. It is raining, and I watch it all happen through the rain. I have had the dream three times that I can remember."

Lorenzo looked at her strangely for a moment but didn't respond immediately. "Come with me," he said finally. He led her through bushes flooded with fragrant white roses to another small altar, this surmounted by the marble statue of a woman. A dove rested on her outstretched hand.

"She's beautiful," Lucrezia gasped. "Who is she?"

"Maria Magdalena. Our Lady, the Queen of Compassion."

Lucrezia gasped. "Oh! She is in my dream too!"

"You dream of our Lady Magdalena as well?" It was Lorenzo's turn to gasp.

She nodded solemnly, then asked, "Is that bad?"

"No," Lorenzo laughed. "It is, I think, very, very good!"

Lorenzo took her hand again and knelt before the statue, indicating that she should do the same. Lucrezia obeyed, without letting go of his hand. She didn't understand the strange mixture of pagan and Christian symbolism, but she was nonetheless enchanted by this place. There was a sense of magic here, of the harmony of which Lorenzo spoke. And if he came here to pray, surely it couldn't be a bad place.

"Lorenzo, will you teach me about all of this? About what it all means?"

He smiled at her and nodded. "Pray with me. First we will give thanks that God has spared our dove thus far. And then ..." He paused for a moment, overcome with shyness. When he continued, the words came out in a rush, so he could not stop them. "We will give thanks that God has brought us together."

"I will gladly pray for both of those things, and to thank God for loving me so much that he brought you to me on my birthday."

Lucrezia Donati blushed prettily as she squeezed his hand, and then she lowered her head in prayer. Lorenzo did the same, and at that moment the sun struck the marble, illuminating the statue before them. Somewhere in the distance, they both heard the cooing of a dove.



Lucrezia Donati was true to her word. She found a way out almost daily, running to meet Lorenzo on the edge of her family's property and to ride with him on Morello to see Ficino. There they would feed the dove gingerly by hand; it appeared to be recovering well under their care. They finished each day with a trip to the secret garden, the Temple of Love as it was known to the Medici.

Each day, Lorenzo shared with her some piece of his classical education. Lucrezia was an apt and eager pupil, memorizing everything Lorenzo taught her and asking many questions.

It was on such a day that Lucrezia surprised him with a request.

"Lorenzo, I want you to teach me Greek."

"You want to learn Greek? Really? Why?"

"Yes, really. And I have had much education for a girl, and you will find I am a good student," she said with a haughty little tilt of her head, which Lorenzo thought was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She continued, "I want to learn because you love it, and I want to know about all the things that you love. I want to experience them and share them with you. Will you teach me Greek, Lorenzo?"

"I will teach you anything your heart desires. We will start tomorrow after visiting our feathered foundling."

The following day Lorenzo was prepared with a gift of a Greek primer wrapped with a red silk ribbon. He was rewarded with one of Lucrezia's dazzling, dimpled smiles and her contagious excitement. The lessons began in earnest, and he found that she was, indeed, an astonishing student. At the end of the fourth week, Lorenzo presented Lucrezia with some Greek letters he had written on a parchment.

"What's this?"

"Today's lesson. I want you to translate the question for me, and then I want you to answer it. In Greek, of course."

Lucrezia wrinkled her brow in concentration. She was studying very hard,

but it had only been a few weeks. She stumbled over some letters but allowed Lorenzo to correct her gently. Finally, she realized what the parchment said and squealed with delight.

The words spelled out “May I kiss you?”

She replied in Greek, with one of the few words she knew well, “*Nai.*”

Yes.



At the end of the third week, Ficino advised the two of them that he was certain the dove had healed and could be released into the wild. Lorenzo and Lucrezia were giddy with the excitement of their success. In a duplication of their first meeting, Lucrezia rode ahead of Lorenzo, encircled in his arms, the dove clutched to her breast. Morello took them to the edge of the forest, where they dismounted. Lorenzo unwrapped the linen strips from the bird delicately while Lucrezia held him in place. The sticks fell away, and the dove exercised his wing, cooing up at them as he did so.

“He is expressing his gratitude,” Lorenzo observed with wonder.

Lucrezia stroked the bird on the back of his neck, tears filling her eyes, “Good-bye, my little friend. I shall miss you so.” Her tears fell on his repaired wing. When she looked up, she saw that Lorenzo’s eyes were also bright with tears.

“Are you ready?” he whispered.

Lucrezia nodded, and together they lifted the dove into the air. He flapped several times, stretching his healed wing, cooed again, and then flew off in a cloud of white feathers. They watched him fly, a little unsteady at first, but then straighter and stronger. Finally he alighted on a tree branch, cooing back at them.

“Lorenzo, look! He landed on a laurel tree!”

Lorenzo shook his head in amazement, both at the bird’s choice of perch and at Lucrezia’s acute perception of the symbolism. The laurel tree was his personal emblem, as the word *laurel* and the Latin version of his name, Laurentius, had the same root.

“He is honoring you for saving his life.”

Lorenzo turned from the bird to the beautiful young woman standing before him. “It is you who saved him. There is much of your spirit in that dove.” He cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her very gently. He stopped

himself after an instant and straightened.

“I have just thought of something.”

“What?” she asked, breathless as she always was when he kissed her.

“I have been thinking of what I shall call you. My mother’s name is Lucrezia, and it does not suit you for me. But the dove has settled it. I shall call you Colombina. My little dove.”

“It is the most beautiful name ever,” she whispered.

This time, it was she who kissed him, standing on her tiptoes to find his lips. In that moment in the forest, with the promise of spring and the renewal of life all around them, they spoke their love for each other aloud for the first time. It was a love that would endure through their turbulent lives and the often difficult path that God would present to them, separately and together.

It was a love that existed for eternity. From the beginning of time, to the end of time.



Regarding The Madonna of Humilitas, also called Madonna of the Magnificat

Madonna Lucrezia commissioned me to create a portrait of her family, as a gift to honor the twenty years since she and Piero entered into their union.

I have painted her as the Madonna. Which Madonna? Does it matter? Are they not all one, in the end? The eternal mother, our lady of compassion and humility. And yet this is a celebration of motherhood in a way that cannot be accomplished with a virgin, and indeed this Madonna is our lady Lucrezia portrayed as Magdalena. She writes the Magnificat, a hymn of praise to God, because Lucrezia is herself a grand poetess, and there is a great legend surrounding Magdalena’s own writings. I have layered the Madonna’s hair in pure gold, that the world may know the brilliance of the women who inspired the work.

It is good to have the Medici as patrons!

Of the angels who surround Our Lady, I have painted Lorenzo as the one who holds the inkwell, as he is the Poet Prince whence the new inspiration will flow. I sketched Lorenzo in profile for this painting during one of our lessons when he didn’t know I was watching. He was gazing up at the Master as he told us the legend of Longinus the Centurion. I wanted to capture Lorenzo in a devotional moment, so that the energy of this emotion was infused into the work. And in profile, Lorenzo is most beautiful.

The angelic Giuliano helps to hold the book and gazes at his elder brother for guidance. This will always be Giuliano's role: he will help Lorenzo, and he will look up to him. If he is wise, he will learn from him. Giuliano has the face of an angel, and thus I have depicted his full face. To achieve his stillness long enough to capture him from this angle is no easy task, and required some bribery and the help of Madonna Lucrezia. He is at an age when stillness is most unnatural for a boy.

The eldest Medici sister, Maria, has her hands on each of her beloved brothers, protectively, as this is her loving nature. The other two girls, Nannina and Bianca, are the angels who hold the crown over the Madonna's head. The first grandchild of Piero and Lucrezia represents all the golden children of the flourishing Medici line. The child's hand rests on the word "Humilitas." It is one of the great virtues according to the Libro Rosso, the opposite of pride and hubris. It is the message that Madonna Lucrezia has chosen as the most important at this time for her children to embrace. To be a truly great leader is to know humility.

The child holds a pomegranate. As the master has taught us, and Ficino confirms through his deep studies of the Greeks, the pomegranate is the symbol of indissoluble wedlock. It is the emblem of a marriage that cannot be destroyed. For what God has put together, let no man separate.

The marriage of Piero and Lucrezia is the most indissoluble of any I have ever seen. They walk in the footsteps, truly, of our Lord and Lady.

It was a joy for me to paint the features of Madonna Lucrezia as our beloved Magdalena. I have taken liberties with her coloring and softened her a bit, showing Lucrezia de' Medici as she appears to those of us who revere her: she is radiant, she is golden, she is "perfected."

In the background I have painted the underground stream as it flows directly to Careggi, as that place is the home of the greatest learning and a refuge for those who would learn to open their eyes and attune their ears to the great truths. It emanates from the women of the bloodline as an artery of life and beauty to all of us with eyes to see and ears to hear.

I remain,

Alessandro di Filipepi, known as "Botticelli"

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

Montevecchio

1463

DURING HIS STAYS in Careggi, Lorenzo brought Lucrezia with him to Ficino's adjacent retreat in Montevecchio, the small villa that Cosimo had built for

him as the headquarters of the Platonic Academy. The academy was flourishing under Ficino's guidance, becoming a solid educational facility for their Florentine colleagues who cared to study the classics in a relaxed social setting where true dialogue and debate could occur. Poets, philosophers, architects, artists, and scholars flocked to Ficino's retreat each time he announced that he would hold a meeting of the academy. In between those events, Ficino used Montevecchio as a school for Lorenzo and sometimes Sandro, when the latter wasn't in Florence apprenticing with Verrocchio. Sandro would be spending more time in Careggi, at Cosimo's insistence, as the elder Medici wanted to expose Sandro to Fra Filippo's particular techniques of artistic infusion. And while Sandro was being pushed to new levels of artistic achievement, Cosimo felt the time was right to add to his classical education as well.

Lucrezia Donati, whom they were all now referring to only as Colombina, had convinced her parents that she was staying behind in Careggi so often to learn embroidery from Madonna Lucrezia along with the Medici daughters. Mona Lucrezia was renowned for her skill, and to have such an illustrious teacher was a feather in the cap of the Donati heiress. Her parents were far more concerned with their social status in town to worry overmuch about their daughter's whereabouts. As long as they believed she was engaged in a suitable feminine pastime with other influential and respectable women, they would leave her alone.

Lorenzo, Sandro, and Colombina had, in fact, become quite the trinity, and they often spent time together before and after lessons. Sandro adored Colombina—everybody did, it seemed—and he sketched her often as inspiration for the various madonnas he was working on in the studio. Ficino's own earlier resistance to Colombina had long since melted in the warmth of her brilliance and interest in the classics. Most of all, she was a natural at language. And Colombina brought out the best in Lorenzo, who worked even harder at his studies to impress her. To his credit, Lorenzo never ceased to encourage the girl and show his pride in her achievements, which were many and growing more frequent.

Ficino was fond of telling Colombina that if she had been born a man with such a quick mind and bold spirit, she would have ruled the world. Still, as one of Lorenzo's unofficial guardians, he was careful not to encourage their commitment to each other beyond what was literally platonic. He referred to them as Apollo and Artemis, emphasizing their connection as brother and sister, as a duo who could bring light to Florence through the masculine sun and the feminine moon. He hoped that this continued emphasis would aid them in the future, when they would ultimately face the harsh realities of

arranged marriages and political alliances that awaited wealthy Florentines. If they could find joy in their role as spiritual brother and sister, perhaps that energy could be channeled into their continued work together for their common cause in the Order, which he had no doubt that Colombina would embrace with extraordinary zeal once she was introduced to it.

Sometimes Jacopo Bracciolini joined in the lessons. Lorenzo had known Jacopo since they were little boys, had jousting with him on ponies, wrestled in the mud while playing knights of the Crusades using broom handles as lances, and marched with him in parades. Jacopo had been the Master of the Cats in the Magi procession when the boys were both ten years of age; he had continued to develop his wicked sense of humor and insatiable need for attention through his teen years.

Sometimes he was truly funny, and at other times he was simply annoying. Sandro barely tolerated Jacopo, but Lorenzo valued him as a brother in spirit and defended him against Sandro's barbs. Not only was Jacopo one of his oldest friends, but the boy's father, Poggio, was a high-ranking member of the Order, after Cosimo. This fact alone made him family, and Lorenzo was highly protective of all aspects of family.

Colombina was kind to everyone, and despite the fact that Jacopo was forever the prankster and always up to some trick or joke at another's expense, she had a soft spot for him. He craved attention, but he was also possessed of a brilliant mind and was capable of deep and insightful conversation. Jacopo once stuffed a tiny frog into the inkpot and exploded in laughter when the poor creature finally broke free, trailing little frog-shaped inkblots across Master Ficino's important translations. But Jacopo could be entirely serious when discussing the glory of Florence and its importance in European history. The Bracciolinis were a storied and noble Florentine family, and Jacopo was proud of his heritage.

His presence, however, changed the chemistry of their little trinity, which was one of the reasons Sandro was annoyed by it. It was particularly noticeable today during Ficino's lesson on Virgil's *Eclogues*.

"Love conquers all things; let us too surrender to love." Ficino quoted the most famous of Virgil's lines and asked each student to provide an interpretation of the idea behind it. Colombina explained that love was the greatest source of power in the universe. Lorenzo, not surprisingly, agreed with her and further discussed the contrast between conquest and surrender. Jacopo, however, was having none of it and began twisting the words.

"Love conquers all fools; let us too surrender to nothing," Jacopo quipped.

Young Bracciolini seemed particularly disruptive today, as if the lesson on love were a thorn in his side. Ficino grappled with him briefly but decided he was in no mood for the boy's antics. There were stacks of translations waiting for him from Cosimo. Thus he dismissed his students early and took note as Jacopo dashed out past them all, without even looking back or saying goodbye.



Lorenzo was not so easily dismissed, however. He had been hounding Ficino to bring Colombina to meet the Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher for approval. Ficino knew it was inevitable, but with Cosimo growing weaker by the day, he had little time for anything other than completing the outstanding translations of ancient manuscripts for his patron and teaching Lorenzo. Cosimo had opened the Medici library to the scholars of Florence, the first time any private library had been opened to the public. And he wanted to add more manuscripts, translations of some of the rare Greek documents that had been unearthed on the many Medici missions of discovery through the Near East. Ficino was under pressure to accomplish these translations for Cosimo. The unspoken sentence between them was that Cosimo wanted to see them and read them himself, before he left this life for the next.

Lorenzo had had an astrology lesson before the Virgil debacle, and it led him to ask Ficino to look at the aspects of this birth chart together with Colombina's. Ficino grumbled about it good-naturedly but retrieved a valuable ephemeris while doing so, a gift from Cosimo. He paged through the enormous book, an encyclopedia that detailed the placement of the planets, taking note of where the heavenly bodies were in the sky when both children were born. Scribbling the squiggles and analyzing the numbers for some time, he finally made his pronouncement.

Ficino cleared his throat and grew very serious. Astrology was his passion, and his natural intensity increased when he discussed it in detail. A man of utter integrity, he also knew he must speak the truth of his findings despite his personal hesitation to do so.

"I see something here that is ... unique. Your love for each other will only grow through time and last ... an eternity. It is divine love. God-given. You were made, one for the other, by God. And no man—or woman—will ever be able to take that from the two of you."

Lorenzo grabbed for Colombina's hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her beautiful, long fingers impulsively. "I could have told you all of that

without the aid of the stars.”

Colombina smiled at him but turned back to Ficino, suddenly serious. “You give us such beautiful news. Words about God, and about divine love that lasts forever. And yet you deliver it with sadness. Why, Maestro?”

Ficino reached out his hand to place a finger under her chin, tilting her head, like a sculptor preparing to work, before answering in his thoughtful, halting way. “Because, dear child, your love will not be supported by the circumstances you have both been born into. It—and you—will face many challenges in your lives. Lorenzo’s destiny ...” He stopped as he looked down at one of the squiggles on the paper, then smeared the ink across it with the tip of his finger. “There are others who would make such decisions for you.”

Lorenzo’s earlier giddiness evaporated as he looked at his love with a new sadness.

“My father,” Colombina said simply.

“You are correct. And yet ... I urge you to remember one thing, my children: what God has put together ... no man can separate.”

With a heavy heart, Marsilio Ficino watched his most beloved pupils leave. He knew so much more than what he had imparted to the young lovers. But even in all his wisdom, he understood that there was something happening here that was larger than his education and experience. There was only one man alive who could help them now, the only man who truly deserved to be called the Master.

Ficino grabbed his lightweight cape and went in search of Fra Francesco.



Marsilio Ficino did not have to search very far for Fra Francesco, as he was installed in his own little wing in Monteverchio and rarely ventured beyond the gardens, where he had installed an elegant labyrinth made of paving stones. Fra Francesco used the labyrinth as a walking prayer tool and also taught lessons within it. But today he was indoors in his study, as if he had been anticipating Ficino’s arrival.

“How is it possible that we did not know of this Donati girl?” Fra Francesco’s question to Ficino was not a reprimand, as that was not in his nature. It was a sincere, curious question.

Still, it irked Ficino that he hadn’t seen it earlier. Why hadn’t he thought to look at her astrological chart before? The stars were very clear.

“The Donati are traditionalists,” he replied. “They are not of our beliefs and would not welcome our teachings. They’re solid Catholics and would think that what we do is a serious aberration.”

“More’s the pity, given that their daughter is likely an Expected One. Are we sure they can’t be swayed?”

Ficino pulled himself up, surprised that Fra Francesco had made that pronouncement without even meeting the girl. The Master noticed and continued.

“It stands to reason that she is, given Lorenzo’s obsession with her. She is of a noble Tuscan family, an ancient one, and one that Dante married into. All ancient Tuscan families are bloodline, Marsilio; never forget that. All three of the great holy blood dynasties settled in Tuscany and Umbria, and it is the only place in Europe where that ever occurred. That is why this place is more exalted than any other.”

“It’s also why there are so many blood feuds and family rivalries,” Ficino observed.

“Yes, yes, that is sadly true. But it is also what we are working to repair with all the intermarrying that we have sponsored. Whoever would have thought that the Albizzi and the Medici would ever unite into one family through marriage? And the Pazzi? But it is happening. Perhaps we can convince the Donati to give their daughter in marriage to Lorenzo.”

Ficino shook his head sadly. “We can try, but I do not have much optimism for success. Not because it is a blood feud. The Donati and the Medici are peaceful enough as neighbors, though the Donati are untrustworthy, I think. But it is their status that is the problem. They are elitists as well as Catholics. That is a difficult combination. For all that the Medici are one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Europe—”

“And the *true* royalty of this land,” Fra Francesco reminded him, making reference to the ancient and storied lineage of the family, as well as Lorenzo’s exalted birth.

“Yes, but you would not get the aristocratic Donati to agree with you. From their perspective, the Medici are merchants and many layers beneath them on the hierarchy of mankind.”

“This girl. You say she is intelligent as well?”

Ficino nodded. “She is Lorenzo’s equal, Master. I would say that to no one but you, but she is. Aside from her horoscope, I can see that she is his own

soul's twin through the way that she learns and the subjects in which she excels. They are so similar sometimes that I find it disturbing. There is a symmetry there, a perfection in their togetherness. And yet ... I can also see that it is not their destiny to be together. Such things make me ask questions of God and of faith."

Fra Francesco nodded. "Fair enough, my boy, fair enough. I have seen many things in my long life that would make me question the will of God, and most of them pertain to the course of love. Why are two souls made for each other but then kept apart? It is the strife of love, Marsilio. The strife of love in the dream we call life. But it all has purpose, and that purpose is to seek union. We are tested to see if we have the mettle to battle the illusion and find the love at the end of the dream. And when we do, the dream becomes a reality. Then nothing is more beautiful."

Ficino, who had never been in love in all his years, merely nodded, as he had nothing to add. He was a singular soul, happiest when immersed in his studies and his books, and not one to be distracted by longings of love. It was simply something he did not crave.

"Earthly love is not the mission for everyone, of course," Fra Francesco continued. "There are a number of angels, like yourself, who have come here to work in singular purpose. You do not crave love because you were not incarnated with a mate. You do not search for anyone, because there is no one here for you."

"I am happy as I am, Master."

"Of course you are! Our mother and father in heaven do not make mistakes, and they are never cruel. They would not send you here without a mate and then give you the terrible longing to find one. Instead, they send you here alone so you can focus on your work, which is your one true love. And it makes you completely happy, as it was meant to."

The Master laughed now, the jagged scar beneath his beard bobbing up and down. "And this is why it is your mission to teach the classics and linguistics, while it is my job to teach about love. Which brings us back to the subject at hand. What shall we do about this delightful new Expected One who is Lorenzo's one true love? Have you discussed her with Cosimo?"

Ficino shook his head. "Cosimo's health is a concern and I do not wish to burden him with this yet until you are certain that she is what we think she is."

"Well then, there is only one thing left to do. Bring her to me as soon as you can so that we may decide this, once and for all."



Colombina joined Lorenzo in Montecatini the next day, where she was brought into the presence of the Master for the first time. She had heard many stories of him, of course, and Lorenzo worshipped him absolutely as the wisest and kindest man who ever lived. He had warned her of his ancient and rugged appearance, but such things did not affect her at all. Colombina was a pure spirit, and she saw others for what they were in their truest selves and not what they were on the surface.

They spent the first hour together in the drawing room of Ficino's house, the four of them. The Master watched Colombina interact with Lorenzo and Ficino, interested in observing her in her most natural way. He realized as he watched her that there was no other way to view her: she was entirely without artifice.

The Master smiled at the little gathering but then announced that it was time for him to speak to Colombina on her own. Ficino excused himself and dragged Lorenzo with him. They had plenty of preparation to do for the Platonic Academy meeting later in the week.

When Ficino and Lorenzo had gone, Fra Francesco asked, "Now, my dear. Lorenzo tells me that you have had dreams of the crucifixion and of Our Lady Magdalena. When did these begin?"

Colombina nodded obediently and told him. "The first time was last year, the night before I met Lorenzo. And I remember because it was the eve of my birthday and I woke up crying. My mother was most vexed. 'Why are you crying when it is your birthday and the beginning of spring?' she asked me. I told her that I had a nightmare, but I did not tell her what it was. My mother is very religious, and I have no doubt that if I told her about the dream I had, she would send me off to a convent!"

"Will you tell me of the dream?"

"Oh yes. I do not think that *you* will send me to a convent!" She laughed.

Fra Francesco laughed with her. "I can assure you that will never happen."

"Well, I see Our Lord upon the cross, and it is raining very hard. And I see Maria Magdalena at the foot of the cross, and she is weeping terribly, and I begin to cry with her. I see other women there as well: the Holy Mother and the other Marys. All of them are weeping, but none of them can I feel so much as Magdalena. I ..." She paused for a moment, looking down at her hands in her lap, hesitating to discuss the part of the dream that could land her in a convent with no means of escape.

“Go on, my dear. You have nothing to fear from me.”

She smiled at him then, the dazzling dimpled smile that enchanted everyone who came in contact with her. “I know that, Master. I have known that since the moment I walked in the door. It is just that the next part of the dream is not so easy to explain. But ... I feel what Magdalena is feeling in the dream, as if I am her, and yet I know that I am not really her. But it is as if she wants me to know her mind and her heart, and so she somehow shares them with me. It would be strange enough if I had the dream just once, but I have had it three times.”

Fra Francesco nodded at her. “It is a remarkable dream, little dove. A blessed dream. Do you see any of the Roman soldiers in the dream, by chance? See their faces?”

She shook her head. “No, not very clearly. I am aware that they are there, but I do not see them. I am mostly aware of Magdalena.”

The Master nodded, satisfied. Colombina was indeed having the identical dream of the crucifixion that all the Expected Ones who came before had experienced. And if she was unable to see the face of the centurions, so much the better: it kept him from having to explain why the face of Longinus Gaius was a younger version of his own face, with its terrible scar across the left cheek.

There was no doubt that Colombina was authentic, a daughter of the holy prophecy. And like all the bloodline prophetesses, she wasn’t just seeing Magdalena, she was feeling her. But how would they get her away from her parents and into proper Order training? What role could this girl play if she was not able to marry Lorenzo, which was highly unlikely?

Fra Francesco embraced the girl, then released her to spend the rest of the afternoon with her beloved Lorenzo. He smiled as they wandered off to the garden, hand in hand. To watch the two of them together was a blessed thing. It gave him hope and filled his ancient heart with love, in spite of Marsilio’s dire predictions.

“Love conquers all, my children,” he whispered after them. “Love conquers all.”

PART TWO

The Miracle of the One Thing

Truly, without Deceit, certainly and absolutely ...

That which is below corresponds to that which is above,
and that which is above corresponds to that which is below,
in the accomplishment of the Miracle of the One Thing ...

Its Father is the Sun. Its Mother is the Moon.

The Wind has carried it in his belly.

Its nourishment is the Earth.

It rises from Earth to Heaven,

and then it descends again to the Earth,
and receives Power from above and from below.

Thus you will have Glory of the whole World.

All obscurity will be clear to you.

This is the strong Power of all Power

In this way was the world created.

From this there will be amazing applications,
because this is the Pattern.

Therefore am I called Thrice-Great Hermes,
having the three parts of the wisdom of the whole World.

THE EMERALD TABLET OF HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

*Antica Torre, Santa Trinità District
Florence
present day*

AT THE EDGE of the river Arno lies a district known as Santa Trinità, an area named for the Holy Trinity. A secretive and mysterious community of monks with ties to the Order built a monastery there in the tenth century, under the patronage of Siegfried of Lucca, Matilda of Canossa's legendary great-great-grandfather. The monks were not only sympathetic to the origins of the Order, some of them were descended from the most powerful bloodline families themselves and were sworn members. Here, the teachings of the Libro Rosso were preserved, the sanctity of union and the truth of the Trinity were understood as cornerstones to the true teachings.

The antique towers of the Gianfigliazza family had stood guard over the edge of the neighborhood known as Santa Trinità for almost eight hundred years. Today, both towers existed in perfect restored condition, straddling either side of the fashionable shopping street named for the family of Lorenzo de' Medici's mother, the Via Tornabuoni. One tower had been converted into a fashion museum as well as the flagship store of the ultrachic Italian designer Salvatore Ferragamo. The other tower contained a hotel as well as a series of private apartments. On one floor of the south tower were the living quarters of Petra Gianfigliazza; the apartment was also the current headquarters of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher.

A stunning and stylish blonde, Petra had purchased this apartment in the tower in an effort to reclaim her family's ancestral property in Florence using the money she had saved while working as a fashion model in Milan. She was too old to model now, although still more beautiful than most of the girls half her age who were working the runways these days. The fashion world had changed too much for her taste over the years with its unhealthy emphasis on girls who were encouraged to starve themselves and use artificial stimulants to stunt their appetites. She had worked in it for as long as she could stand. Thus Petra had been delighted when Destino had phoned to tell her that he wanted to return to Florence from France. She had not seen him in a few years, although they kept in close contact and had since she was a child and his devoted student. Her family still owned some of the property not far from Monteverchio, where Destino stored the artifacts of the Order and had last lived while in Florence.

Since his return to Italy, Destino most often stayed in Monteverchio. Petra worried about him out there on his own in that old house. He had aged

tremendously since she had seen him last and was indeed looking very frail. She was relieved when he had decided that staying in the city was a better idea once Maureen and her friends arrived. There would be many sights in Florence to show them pertaining to the Order, and it would be far easier if they were all here in one place. Petra was just glad that she could keep an eye on him at the same time.

And now, after Vittoria Buondelmonti's latest rogue antics, Petra was feeling more protective of Destino than ever. She had attempted to reach Vittoria after her outrageous behavior in New York and her tawdry public claims that Bérenger Sinclair had fathered her child. Vittoria had not returned her calls. Yet. But she would eventually. Petra had been Vittoria's mentor on the runway but also in the Order, as they both came from ancient Tuscan families with related heritage. Their relationship made Vittoria's erratic actions of the last week all the more upsetting.

Meanwhile, Petra had protected Destino from the news. Her beloved teacher's health was more fragile than ever, and she didn't want to send him into shock over recent events. Destino loved all his students as if they were his own children, so when one went off the rails, as it appeared Vittoria had, he became extremely distressed. Petra feared that Vittoria's obvious attempt to destroy Maureen and Bérenger's relationship would have a profound effect on Destino. She knew she couldn't keep it from him much longer, as Maureen was certainly bound to ask him for advice in the matter, if Bérenger didn't. Petra would have to alert him before that happened, but she needed to have this out with Vittoria first.

Destino currently shared Petra's spacious apartment, while Maureen and her friends were installed in the adjoining hotel. They were able to hold meetings either in Petra's living room or on the roof deck of the tower, with its stunning views of the Duomo on one side and the Ponte Vecchio on the other.

It was here, on the roof deck, that Destino and Petra, the modern leaders of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, first met with Maureen's little group, which included Tammy, Roland, and Peter. Bérenger was conspicuously absent, having flown to Scotland to investigate the allegations against his brother. No one had heard from him in the last twenty-four hours, and they were all getting anxious about the events within Sinclair manor.

The group, sans Bérenger, was assembled now in the Florentine sunshine. The church of Santa Trinità, where Countess Matilda had trained a thousand years earlier—trained with the same man who sat before them, if he was to be believed—was visible immediately below them.

Petra, a flawless hostess, had selected local wines and cheeses to provide for her guests. She introduced herself quite humbly as Destino's secretary and for the moment appeared very content to stay in the background. But for all her deference, she was a powerful presence of whom everyone in attendance was very aware.

Destino opened their meeting in the same way he had done for two thousand years—with the prayer of the Order:

*We honor God while praying for a time
when these teachings will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.*

He then began the lesson.

"My children, the fully realized man or woman, the *anthropos*, knows what his or her promise is and works consciously toward fulfilling it. Less enlightened beings wander the earth with a spiritual aimlessness. They do not realize that they made a promise, so they cannot keep it. But you all do realize it, whether consciously or not, which is why you are here.

"Our mission is to keep our promise, which was to restore the golden age by returning the true teachings to the world. Lorenzo and his own 'family of spirit' prepared the way for us. Despite the greatness and beauty that emerged from their lives, they were unsuccessful in fulfilling the mission completely. We will study the life of Lorenzo and we will learn from it. We will understand what failed and what succeeded, so that we may continue the work of restoring beauty to the world.

"That you have all come sends the message to our mother and father in heaven that their children are grateful and obedient, and fully prepared to carry out their mission on earth. I am certain that heaven is rejoicing today. The time returns."

"The time returns," they all said in unison. And as Peter Healy raised his glass to participate in the toast, he was aware of Petra Gianfigliazza's brown eyes examining him very, very closely.



Peter opened his copy of the Libro Rosso translations, paging through it until he found the passages that Petra had instructed them to study. He thought about her for a moment, about everything that had happened in the last few days. Petra Gianfigliazza was an impressive woman, and her devotion to Destino was a beautiful thing to observe. As a man who had spent most of his

life in the priesthood, he had never had a female teacher before.

And make no mistake, Petra Gianfigliazza was a teacher. She may have been introduced as Destino's secretary, but it was immediately clear to everyone that she was a force within the Order for the new millennium.

He opened to the pages about Solomon and Sheba, and read.



And so it was that the Queen of the South became known as the Queen of Sheba, which was to say, the Wise Queen of the people of Sabea. Her given name was Makeda, which in her own tongue was "the fiery one." She was a priestess-queen, dedicated to a goddess of the sun who was known to shine beauty and abundance upon the joyous people known as Sabeans.

The people of Sabea were wise above most others in the world, with an understanding of the influence of the stars and the sanctity of numbers that came from their heavenly deities. The queen was the founder of great schools to teach such art and architecture, and the sculptors that served her were able to create images of gods and men in stone that were of exceptional beauty. Her people were literate and committed to the written word and the glory of writing. Poetry and song flourished within her compassionate realm.

It came to pass that the great King Solomon learned of this unparalleled Queen Makeda by virtue of a prophet who advised him, "A woman who is your equal and counterpart reigns in a faraway land of the South. You would learn much from her, and she from you. Meeting her is your destiny." He did not, at first, believe that such a woman could exist, but his curiosity caused him to send an invitation for her, a request to visit his own kingdom on holy Mount Sion. The messengers who came to Sabea to advise the great and fiery Queen Makeda of Solomon's invitation discovered that his wisdom was already legendary in her land, as was the splendor of his court, and she had awareness of him. Her own prophetesses had foreseen that she would one day travel far to find the king with whom she would perform the hieros-gamos, the sacred marriage that combined the body with the mind and spirit in the act of divine union. He would be the twin brother of her soul, and she would become his sister-bride, halves of the same whole, complete only in their coming together.

But the Queen of Sheba was not a woman easily won and would not give herself in so sacred a union to any but the man she would recognize as a part of her soul. As she made the great trek to Mount Sion with her camel train, Makeda devised a series of tests and questions that she would put to the king. His answers to these would help her to determine if he was her equal, her

own soul's twin, conceived as one at the dawn of eternity.

For those with ears to hear, let them hear it.

THE LEGEND OF SOLOMON AND SHEBA, PART ONE,
AS PRESERVED IN THE LIBRO ROSSO

Peter paused before reading on to part two. There was that phrase at the end, “her own soul’s twin, conceived as one at the dawn of eternity.” It struck him and tugged at something deep within him. He had never allowed himself to consider this concept of soul mates and predestined love. As a priest, all his love was for God, and for God’s son and his holy mother. He had taken vows of celibacy at a very early age and kept them completely. For most of his life, Peter felt that he was one of those singular people, created by God for a purpose and to complete specific tasks. It was very rare that he felt otherwise. But in the deepest reaches of his soul, if he was to be completely honest with himself, he did have moments of doubt. They were brief, but they were there. They cropped up when he saw the happiness of a couple strolling together hand in hand across the Pont Neuf in Paris, or a young family playing in the park. Those moments made him question if he was missing out on something, some aspect of life that God may have wanted him to experience.

But God couldn’t have it both ways, could he? If it was Peter’s calling to be a priest, then it was not his calling to fall in love or have a family. At least, that was what he had believed for most of his life.

Spending eighteen months in a French prison had given Father Peter Healy a lot of time to think. The Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the document he had risked his life and freedom for, proved that Jesus knew human love and celebrated it. Peter believed that completely and had believed it even when he was still firmly committed to his vocation and his Catholicism. He wrestled with it, certainly, but had found a way to live with the idea that did not infringe upon his vows. However, these teachings of the Libro Rosso, which included a gospel asserted to be written in Jesus’ own hand, were emphatic that the primary reason for human incarnation was to experience love in all its forms, human and divine, platonic and erotic.

The more he read, the more the teaching resonated with him.

Over the last four years, almost everything that Peter had once held to be the truth had crumbled. Was he even a priest anymore? The Vatican hadn’t stripped him of his collar, but he hadn’t worn one since he was released from jail and did not have any desire to do so. He was not interested in teaching at the moment, and certainly not in a Catholic environment. Peter Healy was now a man without a vocation. He had followed Maureen and the others because they were not only his family in blood and spirit, they were also his

colleagues in a greater endeavor.

Peter was still trying to determine what his own role was in that larger mission that Destino spoke of earlier today. The mission that Petra obviously embraced with joy and intensity. He understood that he had made a promise, and he was here to keep it—but what, specifically, was that promise? He would continue to study what she had assigned him, more intrigued by the moment in where this story was taking him at this pivotal time in his turbulent life.

He read on:



Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, arrived in Sion with gifts to the great King Solomon. She came to him without guile, for she was a woman of purity and truth, incapable of pretense or deception. Thus it was that Makeda told Solomon all that was in her mind and her heart. She knew upon coming into his presence and looking in his eyes that he was a part of her, from the beginning to the end of eternity.

Solomon was mightily taken by Makeda's beauty and presence and disarmed in total by her honesty. The wisdom he saw in her eyes reflected his own, and he knew immediately that the prophets were correct. Here was the woman who was his equal. How could she be else, when she was the other half of his soul?

And it was then that the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon came together in the hieros-gamos, the marriage that unites the bride and the bridegroom in a spiritual matrimony found only within divine law. The Goddess of Makeda blended with the God of Solomon in a union most sacred, the blending of the masculine

and the feminine into one whole being. It was through Solomon and Sheba that El and Asherah came together once again in the flesh.

They stayed in the bridal chamber for the full cycle of the moon in a place of trust and consciousness, allowing nothing to come between them in their union, and it is said that during this time the secrets of the universe were revealed through them. Together, they found the mysteries that God would share with the world, for those with ears to hear.

Solomon wrote over a thousand songs following the inspiration of Makeda, but none as worthy as the Song of Songs, which carries within it the secrets of the hieros-gamos, of how God is found through this union. It is said that Solomon had many wives, yet there was only one who was a part of his soul.

While Makeda was never his wife by the laws of men, she was his only wife by the laws of God and nature, which is to say the law of Love.

When Makeda departed from holy Mount Sion, it was with a heavy heart to leave her one beloved. Such has been the fate of many twinned souls in history, to come together at intervals and discover the deepest secrets of love, but to be ultimately separated by their destinies. Perhaps it is love's greatest trial and mystery—the understanding that there is no separation between true beloveds, regardless of physical circumstance, time or distance, life or death.

Once the hieros-gamos is consummated between predestined souls, the lovers are never apart in their spirits.

For those with ears to hear, let them hear it.

THE LEGEND OF SOLOMON AND SHEBA, PART TWO, AS PRESERVED IN THE LIBRO
ROSSO

Peter closed the book and stood up. He needed to think, and he needed to walk. The layers within the story of Solomon and Sheba were deep—and for him, somewhat disturbing. They inspired him to question everything he had ever believed about himself. He remembered the fixed stare he received from Petra Gianfigliazza at the moment she had also given him his homework assignment. She knew that she was challenging him with these passages, knew that she had given him something to think about that he had never focused on before. No doubt Destino had briefed her well on all the personalities that were coming to Florence, but it was an intuitive choice all the same.

Peter put on his shoes and decided to take a stroll along the Arno. Florence at night was stunning, and perhaps it was just what he needed to help him assimilate.



Peter pushed the enormous wooden security door that kept the outside world away from the private residents in the Antica Torre. As he opened the door, he saw a young woman running across the street toward him, waving.

“Hold the door, please!”

She was out of breath but managed to smile at him as she grabbed the door to keep it open. “I forgot my key,” she explained, pointing at the magnetic lock that secured the entrance. “The magnets. They demagnetize my credit cards so I cannot carry the key in my handbag. I have to keep it separate. It’s such a nuisance!”

Peter nodded at her, preoccupied by all that was swirling through his head. “Good night,” he said politely, as the young woman waved at him and entered the building, headed toward the elevator.

Had he not been so distracted, Peter might have noticed that the door where the woman had held it was covered in blood.



It was a magical night in Florence. The air was silky with the essence of late spring, and a slight breeze blew in from the Arno. Tamara and Roland sat on the roof deck of the Antica Torre, breathing in the atmosphere as the iconic rooftops of Florence came to life under the full moon. If ever a place had been created for two people in love to spend a quiet evening, it was this special terrace.

Roland had spent the last few days helping Tamara with her work, investigating aspects of the Longinus legend. They were still trying to determine whether they would ask Destino to discuss his claims or wait for him to bring it up.

“What is the etiquette for dealing with a man who claims to be two thousand years old?” Tammy asked.

Roland laughed with her. As the heir to a secret society legacy himself, he knew a few things about decorum. “We wait, and see where he takes us. He will trust us more if we do not push him or appear to be plying him for information. And he brought us here for a reason, so I am happy enough to watch that reason reveal itself.”

“Do you think Bérenger will ask him about the spear?”

Roland considered for a moment before nodding. “I hope he does. He needs to. And I think that will be hard to resist for him, not just for the purposes of esoteric knowledge.”

“But because Bérenger is being confronted with his own personal destiny now,” Tammy completed Roland’s thought, as she often did.

Roland nodded. “He is. I have always believed that the Spear of Destiny was a symbol for whatever struggle a man had within himself. It carries some kind of energy or vibration that amplifies what is in the heart of the man who possesses it. A good man is made great, like Charlemagne, and a man with evil intentions can become a monster, like Hitler.”

“Bérenger is a good man, who could be made great.”

Roland nodded, but his brow was wrinkled with the difficult thoughts that filled his head. “But what is the path to greatness for him, Tamara? What should he do? Should he put his own happiness first, and Maureen’s? Or should he take responsibility for this little boy who appears to have been born under very special stars?”

Tammy’s jaw dropped. She loved Roland, and though she knew and understood him intimately, he still had the power to shock her. He had been raised in the strange and complex world of European secret societies. His own father had been the leader of the clandestine Society of Blue Apples and had been brutally murdered as a result of related intrigues. The world in which Roland lived was one where such intrigues were not games or empty rituals; they were life-and-death secrets that impacted history and humanity. Sometimes it was hard for her as an urban American woman to completely grasp the depth—and dangers—of his world. She had witnessed plenty over the recent years through Maureen’s search for priceless lost gospels, and yet each day seemed to bring still greater mystery. Sometimes this was an exciting element of her new life with Roland; sometimes it was frustrating and even frightening.

Tammy stuttered for a moment before getting the question out. “You ... you can’t possibly be saying that Bérenger should marry Vittoria?”

Roland’s gentle eyes bored into hers. There was pain in them, but also an understanding of something deep and ancient that she did not yet grasp.

“Tamara, I love you. And Bérenger loves Maureen in the same way, so know that it tears my heart to pieces to say this. But ... you have not been raised in the ancient ways of our people. You understand them, yes, and you have learned to love them and adopt them as your own. But you did not grow up with the legends of massacred relatives, martyrs who died for our beliefs. In the Languedoc, those are our bedtime stories. We are raised with the legends of our Cathar leaders who were brave enough to walk into flames, to suffer and die for their belief in the love of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, to risk everything to keep the teachings of the Way of Love alive.”

Tammy protested. “I know all of that. But I don’t see how it matters here.”

Roland continued in his patient way. “Bérenger was raised in the Languedoc, as the heir to this legacy. And what is at the center of our traditions? How did Bérenger and Maureen meet? What is it that they have in common?”

The light of understanding was beginning to dawn on Tammy, and she answered accordingly. “The prophecies.”

“Yes, the prophecies. The prophecies of the Expected One and the Poet Prince have guided our people for two thousand years. We have always lived by them, chosen our leaders by them, and they have never failed us. Every day of Bérenger’s childhood, he was reminded that he was the golden prince of this prophecy by his grandfather. It has haunted him all his life. He lives in fear of not fulfilling his destiny, of letting his people down, of failing. And now, added to all this is the responsibility of a child who is born of the same prophecy. And there is something else that you do not yet know ...”

Tammy was listening, but the insistent beeping on her cell phone distracted her momentarily. She clicked it to check the text message that had just arrived and read it to Roland.

“Message from Destino via Petra. We are meeting everyone at the Uffizi tomorrow morning at nine a.m. for a lesson in Botticelli. Now, you were saying?”

So immersed were Tammy and Roland in their conversation that they never noticed the young woman who sat not far away from them, writing in what appeared to be her travel journal. They did not see that she wrote down everything they said, nor did they see the palm of her right hand dripping blood onto the page of her notebook.



“Master, are you all right?” Petra spoke softly as she entered Destino’s room, where he sat on his simple bed in deep contemplation, eyes closed. Destino did not use electric lighting, preferring only candles and oil lamps. He insisted on living simply, despite the wealthy followers who were willing to provide him with any material items he would ever require. But he required very little. Part of the penance he had inflicted upon himself all those years ago was to live in an austere manner, and he had always kept this vow.

Because Destino sometimes fell asleep following his prayer, Petra checked on him each night to ensure that the candles were blown out and the lanterns safe.

“Enter, my dear. And stop worrying about me. I knew this was coming, and I welcome it.”

Petra smiled at him in the semidarkness. Of course he knew. “But what do you welcome, Master? The child himself? The Second Prince?”

Destino opened his eyes slowly. “I welcome the opportunity. I welcome the tests. I welcome the teachings that can and will come from

it all.”

“But Vittoria—”

“Vittoria is playing a role, the role of adversary, the role of challenger.”

Petra understood and replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”

Destino nodded. “*Satan* literally means adversary, as you well know, and in that regard she is now Bérenger’s personal Satan. But do not think of Vittoria as wicked. She is misguided and her intentions are corrupt, but what she is doing has merit to our people. No hero has ever achieved his crown of laurels without facing strong and dangerous opposition. If Bérenger comes through this with an understanding of the true lesson, he will be worthy of that crown. He will deserve to become Lorenzo’s spiritual heir.”

“And if he does not?”

Destino’s eyes, colorless and rheumy with age, clouded over still more as a deep and ragged sigh escaped him. “Then I shall have to stay alive for as many more generations as it takes to find the prince who is worthy of that prophecy.”



Bérenger had phoned Maureen from the airport in Edinburgh to say he was on his way to Florence in the Sinclair Oil private jet. His brother, Alexander, was in a type of legal seclusion as a result of his arrest. Because there were conspiracy charges pending that involved the government, he was being held under special circumstances and without bail. Bérenger was still unclear as to what the charges were but had been told by the judge that he would not be allowed to see Alexander for another three days. There was no use staying in Scotland and sitting on his hands in frustration. Not when he had to repair his relationship with Maureen.

Now he sat on her little terrace at the Antica Torre, the Duomo shining behind him, as he made his confession.

“I lied to you.”

“I know.”

Bérenger nodded, looking deep into her eyes. He knew that he would never be able to lie to her face-to-face. It was impossible. They were too close, too connected. She would always see straight into his soul with her piercing green eyes, and he would always want her to. This was the

realization that had overcome him while he was home in Scotland; he never wanted to hide anything from her again. He wanted them to become so unified as a couple that nothing could come between them. Béranger had hurried to Florence to be with her, to explain, and to beg her forgiveness.

But she did not make him beg.

Maureen too had come to a realization over the last few days. Sitting on the terrace with Destino today, she had missed Béranger desperately. He was integral to this wild, unpredictable, blessed journey that they had embarked upon together. Being without him was like missing a limb. She had read and reread the pages in the Libro Rosso that detailed the relationship of twin souls, of beings created from the same essence, one for the other. It was the most beautiful teaching of the Order, and she had discovered the truth of it through the way that Béranger loved her. She didn't just believe it, she knew it: knew that Béranger was her twin soul, knew that their destinies were as intertwined as their minds and spirits. And if she knew that to be true, how could she walk away from it? She could not. It would be an offense to the gift of love that God had given to them both.

"Maureen, you have taught me the meaning of love. You have transformed me, changed me from someone who was existing to someone who is alive. I am sorry, more than I can ever say, for what has happened with Vittoria. And ... I must tell you that it is possible the child is my son."

"I know that too," Maureen said. She walked from the terrace back into the bedroom to retrieve an envelope from the dressing table. "Vittoria left this for me today."

Béranger opened the envelope and removed the three eight-by-ten photographs from within. They were all pictures of a beautiful little boy, a toddler just over two years old. Béranger caught his breath as he went through the photos one by one. The boy in the photographs, with his long, curly dark hair and his blue-green eyes, looked like a tiny version of Béranger Sinclair.

"You've never seen him." Maureen realized as she watched his unexpected, emotional response to the photos.

"No." His voice was choked as he looked at photos of his son for the first time.

"What are you going to do?"

Béranger was stunned into silence for a moment. The photos of Dante had instantly diminished his previously held determination. Nothing could have prepared him for the impact of seeing this perfect, tiny version of himself.

What stirred in him as he gazed at the child in the photograph was something close to grief. In that moment, he realized that his life had changed indelibly. He had lost all control of it. Dante was his, and he would not deny him.

Bérenger's voice cracked as he ultimately replied. "He's my son, Maureen—just look at him. I don't need a DNA test when I have eyes. And ..."

"And what?"

"He is a child of the prophecy. I don't have to tell you what that means, and I cannot turn my back on the importance of that. And there is something more, something you do not know yet."

Maureen steadied herself in preparation for his explanation. She was shaking. Her entire world was crumbling around her, and she was certain that the final wrecking ball was about to shatter whatever was left of her castles in the air.

"The prophecy. Maureen, there is another piece to it. It is rarely recited because the event of which it speaks has never happened before. It is called the Second Prince." He paused to breathe for a moment before reciting it for her.

*The Son of Man shall himself return
as the Second Prince.
When the time has come and the stars align,
a Poet Prince will be born to a Poet Prince
and become once again the King of Kings.*

Maureen, so familiar with the power of prophecy as it had worked within her own life, was terrified. She did not wish to take the risk of misinterpreting what he was trying to say to her. After a terrible silence between them, she asked in a whisper, "What, exactly, are you saying to me, Bérenger?"

He took both her hands in his, grasping them so tightly that she flinched, as the tears welled in his eyes. "No Poet Prince has ever been born to another. It has never happened in the history of our people that a father and son both shared all the qualities of the prophecy. Therefore the Second Prince ..."

"Is the Second Coming." Maureen finished the sentence with a dull finality, in a voice she did not recognize as her own.

"Maureen, I know it sounds crazy, but think of what we have all been through together. We have seen so much that is impossible. The prophecies have never failed. If there is even a possibility that Dante is ..." Bérenger paused. He was not even able to say it out loud yet, so disturbing was the

concept.

He continued, "If Dante is truly special, then he needs me. And not just to visit him occasionally or to send him money, but to be his father. He will need constant guidance, and he will also need someone to keep his mother's ambitions in check. That will require my constant presence."

Maureen felt the lump burning like a hot coal in the back of her throat as she repeated the question she knew she would never want to hear answered.

"What are you going to do?"

"The right thing. I'm sorry, Maureen. I am so sorry. But I have to prove myself worthy of this position that I hold. I have to pass this test." He shed the tears he had been fighting, then said in a voice that seemed to come from somewhere else, "Perhaps it is our obligation to be noble before it is our obligation to be happy."

Maureen rose as if in slow motion, trying to grasp how a moment so blissful had turned into a nightmare in a matter of seconds. In one instant, they were affirming the undying and eternal nature of their love for each other; in the next, Bérenger was dumping her for a life with Vittoria and their child.

She choked back a sob as she turned from him, found her feet, and ran from the terrace.

*Arezzo, Tuscany
July 21, 1463*

ALESSANDRO DI FILIPEPI was feeling very grateful for his life. At the age of eighteen, he had been apprenticed to the greatest artists in Italy and was proving to be the equal of anyone painting in Florence. Perhaps more important, he had been adopted into the Medici family in everything but name, living and working under the roof of Piero and Lucrezia de' Medici, and acting as an elder brother to the Poet Prince himself and the younger Giuliano. Lorenzo and Sandro had become inseparable, and it was with great excitement that both of them accompanied Cosimo on this pilgrimage to Sansepolcro, the spiritual home of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. Cosimo was weak, but he had rallied with the idea—his own—of bringing the boys there. It was likely to be his last excursion, as the gout made it nearly impossible for him to mount a horse. He rode his gentle white mule at a slow pace beside the equally challenged Fra Francesco. They were perfect company for each other on the journey. And while the boys were itching to move faster, both revered Cosimo and the Master far too much to rush them.

The date was not random, of course; nothing ever was with the Order and those who orchestrated it. Tomorrow, July twenty-second, was the feast day of Mary Magdalene, and it would be celebrated by the official confraternity that carried her name. Lorenzo and Sandro would witness the procession in honor of the woman who both revered as one of their great spiritual leaders. They would follow the feast with a week of intensive study at the hands of the Master and in the presence of the great relics of the Order upon which Sansepolcro had been founded.

But that was the future. Today, the boys were with Cosimo and Fra Francesco on their way to meet with the official artist in residence of the Order: the great Piero della Francesca. This was the source of Sandro's awe and gratitude. Piero della Francesca was the greatest living "angelic," discovered as a boy personally by Fra Francesco; he had been predicted by the Magi and born in the strange and holy little town of Sansepolcro. Piero was a fresco artist without equal, and he was finishing a cycle within the ancient church of San Francesco, the home of the Order in Arezzo. The elaborate frescoes, floor to ceiling and covering an enormous chapel behind the altar, depicted the legend of the True Cross and the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. For members of the Order, this latter was the holiest of stories. It was from the union of Solomon and Sheba that some of the greatest teachings in human history had been handed down, teachings of love and wisdom that were thoroughly transformational. The Order preached that many of the secret teachings that Jesus shared with his followers had been passed through the holy branches of the Davidic lineage, of which Jesus was the heir.

The Order's sacred practice of *hieros-gamos*, the understanding that God is found in the bridal chamber when a man and woman are unified in a place of trust and consciousness, was traced to the union of Solomon and Sheba. Indeed the Old Testament Song of Songs, the ultimate poem of life-affirming passion and sacred union, was attributed to Solomon.

The Master spoke to the boys as they entered the Romanesque church, built here in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century.

"Although we look at the prophecy of the Poet Prince as a Christian concept now, as the coming of men who will restore and protect the true teachings of Christ, it was not always so. The prophecies are ancient. They are timeless. They are from God, and they relate to men and women across time and distance who will come and do God's work—whether they be Jew or Christian or Muslim or Hindu or pagan. It matters not. Solomon and David were both Poet Princes. Think on this for a moment: David wrote Psalms, his son Solomon wrote hundreds of poems, including our most exalted Song of

Songs, and both changed the world in their own way. Jesus was indeed a Poet Prince, but he was by no means the first. He was just one in a long line of them and the most exceptional of them all, no doubt, but certainly not the first or the only—or the last.” He smiled at Lorenzo.

He stopped the boys, as they were in the center of the nave now. “Look up, toward the altar. Pause here to view something very important that our Piero has created. Before you allow your eye to see the magnificence of the frescoes, look first on either side of the altar.”

On both sides of the huge altar space were long, narrow columns. Painted in a twinned manner and perfectly matched were larger-than-life portraits of Jesus on the left and Mary Magdalene on the right. They had been painted perfectly as equals, but also clearly as a pair.

“The portraits of true beloveds. Equals under God,” came a soft male voice from behind them.

Piero della Francesca, holding a paintbrush and covered in pigments, smiled kindly at the boys as he explained his work. “I did not create the original portraits of Our Lord and Our Lady. They were done by another native of Arezzo, a great painter who preceded me here, called Luca Spinello. Sadly his work has deteriorated, but I have restored it. I can only hope to have done him justice. He was a genius, who learned from Giotto.” Piero nodded toward Fra Francesco as he continued. “Perhaps I should say that he learned to paint from Giotto. He learned all else from our Master.”

Piero paused to greet Cosimo with the respect due to the Medici patriarch. Though a native of the southernmost regions of Tuscany, Piero della Francesca had trained extensively in Florence under the patronage of Cosimo. While the Medici family wanted to keep Piero in Florence, they understood the Master’s need for him in Arezzo and Sansepolcro. It was fitting that as the official scribe of the Order, he should establish lasting works of art in this holy region to preserve the teachings.

This would be part of Sandro and Lorenzo’s training over the next week. They would gain a greater understanding of what Piero had accomplished with his unequalled storytelling through fresco painting. Arezzo was the testing ground for these types of “hiding in plain sight” teachings for the Order. Now it would be up to the Florentines to expand on this approach, to bring these same types of powerful, symbolic masterpieces to a larger and more difficult audience. The Order was taking bold steps to conquer Florence through the Medici and their angelic army of artists. If they could achieve their goals in Florence, they would then expand throughout Italy—and

ultimately look toward Rome.

The powerful brotherhood created by Lorenzo and Sandro would begin the revolution into a golden age of art and education. The mission was the restoration of the true teachings of the early Christians through epic works of art.

Ficino was fond of reminding his students, when they became a little too inflated with the importance of their mission, that they didn't start it. They were the blessed heirs to a grand fortune, earned by the blood and sacrifice of the astonishing men and women who came before them. He quoted the great scholar and leader of the Order in the twelfth century, Bernard of Chartres:

“Remember, we are but dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.”

*Florence
present day*

“REMEMBER, WE ARE BUT dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Peter Healy often quoted Bernard of Chartres, keen as he was to remember the greatness of those who came before and gave everything, so that we would not be in the darkness. But the quote seemed particularly applicable as he stood before the statues depicting *Cosimo Pater Patriae* and *Lorenzo il Magnifico* adjacent to the Uffizi Gallery.

Peter and Maureen had walked along the river before making the turn toward the Uffizi, one of the greatest art museums in the world. The approach to this treasury of Renaissance art was lined with the statues of the artists who shaped Florence: painters, writers, architects. They passed Donatello and Leonardo, and up toward the far end of the entrance toward the piazza was the statue of Cosimo, looking very wise and surprisingly warm, standing alongside his grandson. The statue of Lorenzo was equally well crafted and alive. Il Magnifico was depicted with his hand on a bust of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom.

Maureen stood before the stone image of Lorenzo on the pedestal and studied it for a moment, silently. A chill ran through her body as she looked at his face; it was sculpted with the strange feature he was famous for, the nose flattened at the bridge. Yet despite the fact that he was often referred to as homely or even ugly, Maureen was struck by how absolutely beautiful he was. There was extraordinary nobility about him, palpable even from this piece of stone, which had been fashioned hundreds of years after his death.

He was, without question, magnificent.

She shivered, although the sun was well on its way to creating a scorching

May day in Tuscany.

Peter saw the shudder. “What is it?”

Maureen swallowed hard, feeling choked up suddenly. “It ... it looks like him. I mean, I have seen portraits of him and had no reaction, other than to think he was odd-looking. But this ... this is Lorenzo. It’s as if he is trapped in that stone. The image of him. Perfect.”

Maureen was transfixed on Lorenzo, trying to get a grasp on how she was feeling. “I can’t explain it, really, but when I look at this man I feel utterly committed to him. Like I would follow him into a battle against the devil himself. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for him. But that’s not the only meaning of the word *committed* that I am feeling. He was committed. To his cause, to his mission. And that is what inspired such loyalty from so many. Lorenzo would never ask anyone to do something he wasn’t prepared to do himself. I look at this and I just *know* that.”

“He is one of the giants upon whose shoulders we stand,” Maureen added, reflecting in that moment about the meaning of Poet Princes, commitment, and duty.



Maureen and Peter entered the Uffizi, walking up the massive flights of stairs, which challenged even the most physically fit tourists, all of whom panted at the top as they reached the ticket takers.

Maureen noticed another bust of Lorenzo de’ Medici to the right, just at the entrance to the painting gallery. This sculpture was also a powerful portrayal of a great man. It was strange that as she stood before all these images of Lorenzo, she felt as if she were looking at someone she knew well. While she had connected to the subjects she had written about before, it was usually in the dream state or when she was deeply immersed in her writing. It had never occurred in such a visceral, fully conscious way.

Looking at images of Lorenzo de’ Medici made Maureen feel as if she were in mourning over her lost love.

She noticed that Destino, who was waiting just ahead of them with Tammy and Roland, was now watching her. He gestured for her to stand with him, gave a little half smile, and said, “Once you come inside, you will understand far more than ever before. This is an art museum, yet it is also a library of most important volumes. The walls of the Uffizi contain some of the greatest secrets in all of human history.”

Borgo Sansepolcro, Tuscany
July 22, 1463

THE OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED legend of the foundation of Sansepolcro states that the town was formed by two saints, one called Santo Egidio, who arrived with Santo Arcano, who returned to Tuscany in 934 from the Holy Land. With them they brought important relics from the Holy Sepulcher and they built the first oratory here to protect the relics. It was a strangely remote place to bring relics of such grand importance and meant to be venerated by the Christian faithful throughout Italy.

Or was it? The secret legend of Sansepolcro said precisely the opposite—that this tiny town tucked away in the southernmost hills of Tuscany was chosen precisely because it was remote and difficult to find. It would be easy to defend and protect, a place only those who knew it existed—and what it contained—would know how to access. The nature of the holy relics brought from Jerusalem had never been exposed to the public.

It was a fitting place to learn secrets, and Lorenzo and Sandro were both vibrating with the energy of the promise that awaited them. They were in the home of Piero della Francesca, who was examining the processional banner that would be carried at the front of the parade tonight.

“Isn’t she magnificent?” Piero shook his head as he stood before the life-sized image of Mary Magdalene, majestic, beautiful, and enthroned. Lovingly cradled in her lap was a crucifix, but it was by no means the focal point of the banner. “I think she is one of the most important pieces of art ever created. No one has ever captured Our Lady so perfectly. The great Luca Spinello Aretino created her for the Confraternity of Mary Magdalene, which as you likely know is a public profile of the Order in this part of Tuscany. Sometimes I just sit before her for inspiration. Look at her face, the expression of serenity—and yet power. There is nothing penitent about this Magdalene! No, this is the portrait of a queen. Our queen.”

“Do all in your confraternity wear hoods such as this?” Lorenzo was curious now, as the men worshipping at Mary Magdalene’s feet appeared to be penitents. And yet the Order was very clear that Magdalene was not to be viewed in such a way. It diminished her true status and was an invention of the Catholic Church.

“Allegory, my brothers. And important for you to remember as you paint, Sandro,” Piero explained patiently. His calm, measured manner made him a most natural teacher. “Spinello, and all the great master artists, used layer upon layer of symbolism to keep our message clear. See the jars on their

sleeves? A reminder of who Magdalena really is. She is the woman who anoints Jesus because she is bestowing his kingship upon him, and because she is his wife. She is exalted. But they are hooded to remind us that the truth of her is still veiled, and that it is still heresy for us to identify ourselves as her followers in public.

“Now, see here where the backs of their robes are open, as if they were going to flog themselves in an act of self-mutilation? That is a reference to what our Spinello has created on the reverse of the banner.”

He moved the boys around to see the opposite side of the banner. It was a sequence of the flagellation, with Christ tied to a post and being beaten by two Roman soldiers.

“The flagellation is allegory as well, one which Spinello uses to great effect, and I hope to emulate. The message was created by him while working with the Master. They determined that the flagellation was an appropriate symbolic representation of what happened to Jesus every time we denied the truth of his life and his teachings. He is tortured all over again. The true flagellation of Christ was the disinheritance of his family and all that they had to give to the world.

“The same is echoed on the front of the banner with the ‘penitent’ robes, which provide space for the whip to come down in the act of self-mutilation. The message here is that we are hurting ourselves by not acknowledging this beautiful queen for what she came here to teach us. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Sandro Botticelli stood before the red-robed Magdalene in awe of her beauty and overwhelmed by the rich layers of symbolism that the artists before him had worked so hard to integrate into their work. But Piero wasn’t finished.

“Sandro, I see that you are as transfixed by her as I am from the perspective of a painter. You stare at her in awe and wonder why she evokes such emotion from you, aside from her obvious beauty. Do you know why?”

Sandro hadn’t been a student of Fra Filippo Lippi and Andrea della Verrocchio for nothing. He nodded with a smile as he gave what he knew was the correct answer. “Because she was created using the process of infusion.”

“Well done, brother. She was indeed. And Spinello’s approach to infusion was very, very special. If you want your madonnas and goddesses to leap from the work and tell their stories as this one does, you shall need to learn this technique. I don’t suppose you have any interest in taking that lesson

today?”

They all laughed, knowing the answer. Lorenzo prepared to take his leave and allow the two artists to get on with the more specific nature of the lesson. He was going to meet his grandfather and the Master, to make final preparations for the night’s festivities.



A low drone of chanting swirled in the darkness as the solemn procession wound its way through the narrow, cobbled streets of Borgo Sansepolcro. The men who marched in the procession carried torches. They were covered head to toe in their robes, with separate hoods that covered their heads completely. The robes were pristine in their snowwhite fabric. On the sleeves of each robe was an emblem, embroidered in scarlet thread—the alabaster jar to symbolize their devotion to Maria Magdalena and the Order.

The procession wound through the streets. At the center of the parade, two hooded figures carried the majestic Spinello banner, painted with the life-sized image of the Magdalena enthroned. She was truly depicted with grandeur as a female aspect of God and was cheered as such as she was paraded through these streets.

“Madonna Magdalena! Madonna Magdalena!”

Lorenzo watched the procession with his grandfather. For all his youthful excitement, it was a solemn occasion for him. Cosimo was dying, and Lorenzo knew that this would be the last major event he would ever have the opportunity to attend with the old man. It was why he had elected not to march with Sandro—because he did not want to leave Cosimo during the sacred procession. It was something he wanted to share with his most beloved grandfather, a memory he wanted to keep forever.

Lorenzo was moved by the emotions running through him now: grief for the pending loss, which would shatter the world as he knew it; deep religious devotion for the woman they called their queen. These things combined into the pledge that Lorenzo made to Cosimo that night. Tears streamed down his face now as he watched the procession approach them. There was a light in his eyes as he spoke his promise aloud.

“I will not fail you, Grandfather. Nothing will stop me. I will not fail our Lord or our Lady, and I will not fail the legacy of the Medici.”

Cosimo put an arm around him and pulled him close for a moment, realizing as well that this was an ultimate moment for them. “I know that, Lorenzo. I know that more than I have ever known anything. You will not fail

because it is your destiny to succeed. You will be the savior of us all. You will be the greatest Poet Prince that has ever lived. You already are.”

The banner now came to stand before them, and Lorenzo saw that Sandro was marching directly behind it. Their eyes met, and Sandro began to gesture wildly for Lorenzo to join him and march in the rest of the procession. Lorenzo looked up at his grandfather, who was smiling at him.

“Go!” He pushed Lorenzo playfully toward where Sandro was positioned. “Go show your devotion to our Queen of Compassion by marching in her parade!”

Lorenzo smiled back and moved through the crowd to reach Sandro and march beside him. As they began to move forward again, one of the torch bearers came closer, illuminating the rear of the banner. Looking up at the Spinello masterpiece depicting the flagellation of Christ, Lorenzo noticed something he had not seen earlier that day. The light had caught the image of one of the Roman centurions just right. Luca Spinello had painted a jagged scar across the left side of his face.



Colombina.

She was my first muse. The first real woman who inspired me to paint her over and over again. She was beauty in its active principle—a force to be dealt with and never underestimated. From the time she was sixteen to now, I have never known a woman with such fortitude. And yet ... she is Beauty as Fortitude. It is a strength that is not aggressive, but rather it flows from her goodness. When the history of these golden days is written, I fear that Colombina’s name will not be recorded

in the annals. She will be like so many women before her who have been lost in this cycle of history where, somewhere, somehow, the women were abandoned. In that way, and others, she wears the exalted sandals of the holy bride, our Lady, Magdalena.

Half of our spiritual nature and legacy as human beings has been eradicated by the omissions of history.

But I will not allow Colombina to be lost. I have painted her, using infusion techniques, to preserve her unique strength and dedication to our cause—and to our prince—so that the world may one day know her.

Thus it was a great day filled with a delicious sense of synchronicity when I was chosen for the commission to paint the personification of Fortitude.

The judges who make up the great Tribunal of the Merchants have

commissioned paintings of the seven virtues to decorate the walls of their courtroom, hoping that such art will inspire them to make wise judgments as they preside over the squabbles of their trade, small and large. The commission for all seven of the paintings went to Piero del Pollaiuolo originally. While he is a competent painter, his name indicates that he is descended from chicken farmers. There are certainly moments when I look upon his work and think that perhaps we would be better served to have more chickens on the table than paintings from Pollaiuolo.

Some would say I am too harsh. Yet as fate would have it, Piero of the Poultry was unable to deliver all seven of the paintings. I was called in—by the grace of God and the Medici—to execute the seventh virtue, the one he was not inspired enough to attempt: Fortitude.

And so it was that Colombina modeled officially and formally, sitting in that position that so inspires me, with her head tilted on her long neck, with her lovely face, so wise beyond its years, in contemplation of the great tasks awaiting her. Having Colombina in front of me, I found it was most important to capture her exquisite eye color, which I was determined to duplicate. The light was reflecting off her gown that day, which was a golden velvet, and her eyes were the color of amber in the sun. And yet, as we always do, we laughed so often and so hard that I could not always hold the brush steady enough to paint her.

In honor of our Order, and in a reference to the great Piero della Francesca, I executed the draping of her red gown in a manner similar to his Arezzo Magdalene. It was subtle enough that only those of us with eyes to see would understand the nod, but I find great amusement in such things—as does Lorenzo.

Lorenzo was so delighted by the likeness of Colombina that he threatened to commit constant acts of offense as a merchant just so he would be brought before the tribunal and have the opportunity to view the painting! I told him it would be far simpler if he would commission me to create a greater work for him.

*What began as a joke between me and my brother of the spirit evolved into a serious discussion of what, in fact, the ultimate painting would be—the perfect collaboration between art and wisdom, beauty and energy. We contemplated the possibilities then, excited by the ideas as they began to expand and spiral between us. It was a discussion that led to the greatest painting I have ever laid brush and heart to, the perfect depiction of *le temps revient* ...*

But that is another story for another day, as it deserves its very own telling.

*I remain,
Alessandro di Filipepi, known as “Botticelli”*

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*The Uffizi Gallery
Florence
present day*

THEY ALL MOVED together through the halls of the Uffizi, Destino leading the way with his funny, ancient gait, Maureen by his side, listening closely, with Peter, Tammy, and Roland never far behind. The museum was overwhelming in terms of the sheer volume of extraordinary Italian masterpieces collected in one place. It was laid out according to epoch, starting with the Middle Ages gallery, where an enormous Madonna by Cimabue greeted the visitors in the primary room. From there, it was a labyrinth of chambers and corridors, each leading to the next era in art.

“I am very sorry to rush you through this, as each piece in this museum deserves careful consideration,” Destino said. “But we have a very specific destination for a reason, and very particular paintings within that destination as well.”

He brought them through the final room representing the Middle Ages until they reached a chamber dominated by seven similar paintings, each of them larger-than-life portraits of an enthroned, majestic woman.

“The virtues.” Maureen recognized them immediately from the iconography of each. Justice carried her sword; Faith held a chalice. But it was clear that six of the paintings were identical in terms of style and execution. The seventh virtue was the standout, utterly different in essence from her six sisters.

Tammy whistled as she looked around the room, then sang a song from her childhood. “Uh, ‘One of these things is not like the other.’ ”

Of the seven paintings in the room, six had been painted by the same artist. And while they were lovely in their own way, they were eclipsed in total by the seventh.

The painting of Fortitude shone like the Hope diamond set among agates in the rough. This artist had used more vibrant color and elaborate detail, and there was a grace in his execution that was absolutely breathtaking to behold. But what really elevated the painting was the model. The young woman depicted was an extraordinary combination of ethereal beauty and steel-in-the-spine strength. She was stunning.

“Botticelli’s first commission,” Destino explained, pointing at the painting

of Fortitude. “He was determined to prove his output was of an infinitely higher quality than that of the artists who were getting all the commissions in Florence. He threw himself into this work. Poor Pollaiuolo. When he saw how the light of Colombina as Fortitude obscured all six of his paintings, he went into a deep depression and didn’t paint for months.”

“That’s Colombina?” Maureen stood before the image, breathless. Destino had prepared her with the stories of Colombina and Lorenzo as children, beginning over dinner last night and lasting well into the early hours of the morning. Maureen was enthralled with their story and that of Sandro interacting with them as one of their siblings. The Renaissance was coming to life in a way she had never imagined—so human, so real. It was easy to think of these astonishing characters from history as iconic, while forgetting that they were flesh-and-blood humans who laughed and loved and lost. Destino was changing history for her in a most delightful and unexpected way.

“That is most definitely Colombina,” Destino said, his eyes tearing up as he looked at the painting. “And Sandro did what he set out to do. He captured her. And while he painted her many times—the most famous version of her awaits you in the next salon—this is the portrait that makes me miss her above all.”

Maureen stood transfixed before Colombina. The woman was already “talking” to her. She could feel herself slipping deeper into that state in which she merged with one of her subjects. She began to experience what Colombina felt during this time in her life when Sandro captured her on canvas. It was a beautiful time but also painful. She felt love but also deep heartache. Maureen’s own recent pain blended with the strains of Colombina’s that reached out to her across time and space, through the magic of Botticelli’s art. Maureen knew that she was only just beginning to understand the complexities of this “little dove” who was the unsung muse of the greatest men of the Renaissance.

Maureen realized further that her destiny was somehow intertwined with the beautiful yet enigmatic woman who called to her from the canvas.

*Careggi
summer 1464*

“THE TIME RETURNS.”

FRA FRANCESCO started the lesson with that statement, delivering it today to Lorenzo, Sandro, and Colombina. He was particularly happy to be teaching when the three of them were together. There was a harmony, a sense of family and community that occurred when these three spirits occupied the same space. They had a love for each other that was beautiful to behold. Yet they

also challenged each other in a way that only those who completely trust each other are able to do.

Ficino was their primary teacher, drilling them in Greek grammar and quizzing them relentlessly on the allegories and lessons of Plato, but they all thrived under the Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher when he came to present a teaching. It was on these days that Colombina made certain that she was able to find a way out of the house to meet Lorenzo and join the lessons.

As their teacher, Fra Francesco had to be particularly creative and bold when he had all three of them. It was his greatest and most joyous challenge, which was why he chose the core of the Order's philosophy for their lesson today.

"Now, my children, we start. Give me 'the time returns' in the language of the troubadours."

"*Le temps revient*," Lorenzo repeated in French. While his French wasn't fluent, he had learned a fair amount while reading troubadour poetry and studying the ideals of courtly love.

The Master nodded, then expounded on the theme. " 'The time returns' is our most precious teaching because it has many layers, and each of those layers applies to the different type of love. For all of us, it is an understanding that earthly love returns ultimately to divine love, and then divine love recycles again to give us the gift of earthly life. This is the cycle of the soul."

Whereas Colombina and Lorenzo took notes, Sandro sketched through the lessons. This is how he learned, how he remembered, and ultimately how he would express these teachings through paint. As the Master talked, Sandro was drawing a landscape with characters that moved in a type of circle—cyclical, moving from heaven to earth and then back again.

"Now, shall I teach you something that you do not yet know? 'The time returns' pertains to the series of incarnations, from the beginning of time to the end of time, in which souls will incarnate in the quest to be reunited with their 'family of spirit,' and specifically with their one true mate, who, as it is said in the Book of Love, is 'their own soul's twin.' "

Colombina asked, "Master, are we a family of spirit?"

"Do you believe that we are, my dear?"

She nodded. "I love my blood family, of course, but it is different. When I am with Lorenzo and Sandro and Master Ficino and you, I feel something very deep and beautiful. I love you all so much, and I know in my heart that we are a true family."

“ ‘The only thing sweeter than union is reunion,’ ” Lorenzo quoted from the Book of Love.

“Yes, my son. And it is clear to any with a heart that this is the truth for the two of you. And as one of the great troubadour poets once wrote, such love is created ‘*Dès le début du temps, jusqu’à la fin du temps.*’ Say that with me now.”

He instructed them again in the French, and they repeated it until they all had the pronunciation down. And from that day forward, the words of an unknown troubadour who had once sung songs of perfect love for his own lady fair became the truth of Lorenzo and Colombina’s bond:

From the beginning of time, until the end of time.



Sandro later showed Colombina and Lorenzo the sketches he had made during their very special lesson. The first was of Colombina: he had captured her head tilted just so on her beautifully long neck as she contemplated the lesson. He had carefully sketched her lovely long fingers as they intertwined around her pen.

“It is a position I have seen you take before, and one that I have attempted to paint from memory,” Sandro said. As a masterful artist with an eye for sheer beauty, he adored Colombina as the muse she had become. Indeed, she was a muse for all of them; in each she inspired a different aspect of love as taught by the Order. For Lorenzo she was both *eros* and *agape*, inspiring love of the heart, soul, and body. For Sandro, she was the muse of beauty in its active principle, a force, like Venus herself, that transforms everything around it. But she was also his sister of spirit, the essence of the love known as *philia*. For the Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, she was becoming a special muse in the model of the bloodline women who had come before—the prophetesses and scribes who would not only preserve the true teachings but contribute to them in a new world. And she was his daughter, who therefore inspired the love in him known as *storge*.

Together, teacher and pupils shared the love that transforms the world through action and compassion, which was called *eunoia*.

“You are the ultimate muse, Colombina. You are all things to all of us. You are our Magdalena.” Sandro kissed her on the cheek. He rarely showed this softer side to anyone, but his artist’s soul had been very moved while watching her in the lesson today.

Lorenzo was teary watching both of them. He took the drawing from

Sandro and admired it closely. “May I keep this? It is beautiful.”

“Afraid not, brother.” Sandro snatched the drawing back. “I shall be using this as inspiration for the face of future madonnas and goddesses of fortitude. But I assure you, I will paint our Colombina many times—in this pose and in others.”

Careggi
1464

“LORENZO, WE HAVE AN ENEMY.”

Colombina had come to meet Lorenzo in the usual place, where they came together to travel to Ficino’s villa for lessons. But he could see that she was not herself today as he rode up on Morello. Lorenzo dismounted and put his arms around her as she buried her face in his shoulder and began to cry.

“My love, what is it? What has happened?”

She was hiccuping a bit with the sobbing. Lorenzo would have found it quite adorable under other circumstances, but at the moment he was completely preoccupied with identifying and weeding out the enemy.

“Someone—I cannot begin to guess who it may be—has gone to my father and told him about us.”

“Told him what?”

The hiccuping resumed, more intense now. “Oh, Lorenzo, it is horrible. My father asked me today if I had given myself to you completely. Can you imagine hearing such a question from one’s own father? He was told that you would make me your whore just to prove the Medici might, just to show that you could do anything and have anything you desire.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him the truth—no! I have not given myself to you completely, although there is nothing more in the world that I long to do. But Lorenzo, he will forbid me to see you anymore. He is sending me into the city to stay, so that I cannot be tempted by you and our forest. What will we do? I cannot bear to be without you and Sandro and the Maestro ...”

He hugged her hard and allowed her to cry, stroking her hair as he soothed her. “It’s all right, Colombina. You will never be without me. I will think of something.”

At the moment, he was at a loss for what that something might be. But he wasn’t born into the Medici family for nothing.



“Lorenzo, it is out of the question.” Piero de’ Medici was firm in his assertions to his son. Madonna Lucrezia looked on, distressed, as the confrontation continued. “We cannot make enemies out of the Donati family. They are powerful and revered, not only in Florence but throughout Italy.”

“Then allow me to marry her.”

“It is impossible, my son.” Piero was exasperated. He too was a Medici and as such did not like to lose in any endeavor, and this was one they were sure to lose. “The Donati will not even consider it. Do you not think I raised it as an option? He all but spit on me. We are merchant class to them and always will be. They will not allow their daughter to marry any man who does not carry a noble name. They are narrow people of the old ways.”

“She is an Expected One.” Lorenzo pressed his case. “And you know what the Libro Rosso says. ‘When the Expected One and the Poet Prince are reunited, they shall alter the course of the world in their coming together. Just as Solomon and Sheba, they shall discover the secrets of God and man and work tirelessly in their mission to bring heaven to earth.’ ”

“Her family does not believe that. They do not even understand what that is, and if we attempted to explain it, they would be at the doors of Careggi with torches demanding our heads as heretics. Think, Lorenzo, think. We have too much to lose, and not just for ourselves. We must protect the Order and our mission. We cannot risk those things even if they mean sacrificing your happiness.”

“Then what use are the teachings of the Order?”

“Lorenzo!” Madonna Lucrezia could not hide her shock. She had never seen him be disrespectful of their spiritual traditions.

“I want an answer, Mother. If the Book of Love teaches that Colombina and I were made for each other by God at the dawn of time, and that what God has put together no man can separate, then why? Why are we being separated?”

Piero attempted to answer. “The teachings of Our Lord also tell us to love our neighbors above all, and the Donati are our neighbors. They threaten war upon us and all we hold dear if we do not honor them by keeping you away from their child. And so we must.”

Lucrezia tried a softer tactic. “Lorenzo, I understand that you believe the Donati girl is your soul’s own twin. Young love can feel very strong. But—”

"I *know* she is my soul's own twin, Mother. And she knows it. And Fra Francesco knows it. So someone needs to make me understand why, through time, so much true love has been kept apart. Why are all the great love stories about pain and separation? I don't want to be one of those stories. I want to change them. I want to shift the model for the universe. Isn't that what I am meant to do? Isn't that why I was born under this gilded prophecy that imprisons me each day of my life?"

"Oh, Lorenzo! How can you say that?"

"Because it's true, Mother."

Piero responded, "Sometimes, my son, it is our obligation to be noble before it is our obligation to be happy. Keeping peace with the Donati affects every single family in Florence. We cannot return to the blood feuds that we have spent so many years trying to eliminate. If we go to war, the city will be divided and there will be bloodshed and strife among Florentines for generations to come. You and I both know that we cannot allow that to happen."

They all stopped talking when they saw that Cosimo had appeared at the doorway, looking gray and deathly. And yet even though he was days away from dying, he stood unaided and his voice was strong. He dismissed Piero and Lucrezia kindly but firmly, indicating that he desired to speak to his grandson privately. He moved Lorenzo to the settee and sat beside him. His bones creaked as he did so, but he did not seem to notice. As always, Cosimo was singularly focused when he had a mission.

"Lorenzo, I want you to think of some of the leaders of the Order from our history. The great Matilda was secretly married to the pope! They could not be together publicly, ever, throughout their eventful and important lives. And yet they found ways to nurture their love away from the eyes of the world."

"What are you saying, Grandfather? That I should make Colombina my mistress just as her father fears?"

"I am saying that true love finds a way, Lorenzo. I ache for you, my boy. It breaks my heart to know that you may never understand real happiness and contentment because you cannot be with the woman you believe was made for you by God. So I am saying that you must find a way to be with her. And she with you. And you must look outside the rules that society has created for you. God didn't create these rules. Men did. The Church did. And whose rules will you choose to follow? God's? Or man's? You say you want to break the outmoded patterns and create a new model? Then do it. That is part of your destiny, boy."

Cosimo paused for a moment to catch his breath, contemplating for a moment before continuing. “I realize today that I have never told you the story of my own Magdalena, the beautiful woman who is Carlo’s mother.”

Carlo was Cosimo’s illegitimate son, born of his scandalous liaison with a Circassian slave girl. Cosimo’s wife, Contessina, had taken the boy into her household and treated him with great kindness so that he could be raised as a Medici and carry the family name. She had never once complained or been seen to treat Carlo poorly. But it was an unspoken law within the household that Carlo’s origins were not discussed. The fact that he was darker of skin and eyes than the other boys was a constant reminder that he came from a different origin.

“I do not speak of it within the family, as it is a great upset to your grandmother. But it is time for you to know the truth, my boy. Carlo’s mother is my greatest joy, and my greatest pain. She is the love of my life; she is my perfect mate. And yet she is a foreign-born slave whom I can never acknowledge. Tell me, Lorenzo, what was God thinking? Why would God create someone for me so perfect, and then make it impossible for us to be together?”

Lorenzo was stunned. He had thought he understood Cosimo more deeply than anyone else, and yet he was discovering now that there was an entire layer to his grandfather’s life, and character, that he had never suspected.

“I met her while staying in Lucca on a negotiation many years ago. She was a house slave for a noble couple there. While she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, I was relieved to see that the man of the house did not seem to notice. I believe, at the end of the day, that he preferred men to women. As a result, the girl had never been abused by a man, at least not since she had been sold into this family. She was well treated and of good humor. And as she had been in Tuscany for a few years, her command of the language was good. Excellent even. I realized quickly that this was no ignorant slave. She had a mind and a spirit for learning unlike any I had ever seen in a woman. There was a humor that flashed in her eyes and a wisdom that was beyond her years and her origins.

“I stayed in that house for a week but later continued to find reasons to go back there. It was after doing this for several months that I realized I was hopelessly, completely, and utterly in love. Worse, I also understood that this woman was ‘my own soul’s twin’ as is spoken of by the Order, and taught in the Book of Love. But how? Why? And I realized, ultimately, that it didn’t matter. God had put her here and I had found her, and now it was up to me to determine whether or not I could be with her. And the rules of the game—the noblesse, the politics, all of it—said that I could not. I was married to

Contessina. I had children. And I was Cosimo de' Medici."

He paused to let the enormity of these revelations sink in for Lorenzo before continuing.

"But what God has put together, let no man separate. And so, I purchased the girl from the family in Lucca for three times the price she would have been worth on the open market. I bought her a house in Fiesole, and I installed her there as my mistress, where she is to this day. And I refused to refer to her by the name of a slave and began to call her Maria Magdalena, as she was my Queen of Compassion. When the strife of Florentine politics closed in on me, I could escape to my Magdalena and find comfort.

"It killed me to take baby Carlo away from her. Do you not think that she wanted to raise our son? But she also wanted what was best for him and knew that giving him to the family was the greatest gift she could bestow upon him. And so, Lorenzo, my Magdalena and I have known great pain and suffering, and yet ... I wouldn't trade my moments with her for anything in the world. She is my muse, and my greatest love. And one day, when the time returns, we will be together in a different way, if God wills it and it serves the mission."

Lorenzo was speechless for a moment. He chewed on his lip as he considered everything Cosimo had just revealed before asking, "What would you do if you were in my place, Grandfather?"

Cosimo's answer was quick and utterly without hesitation. "I would find her a husband."

"What?" Lorenzo practically screeched his response. Cosimo looked annoyed.

"Stop thinking like a broken-hearted boy and start thinking like a prince. Like a Medici prince. You must outplay your enemy. Yours must always be the strategy that looks a year ahead—two years, five years. The Donati will not allow you to see their daughter, and as long as she is under her father's control, he may dictate every step that she takes. This is a fact. How do you change that fact? By altering the circumstances to suit you better. Parental control is nonexistent once she becomes a married woman. A Florentine matron, particularly one of the Donati's social stature, can make her own decisions about how she spends her time. And while she will not be able to frolic with you in Careggi any longer, there is no reason that she cannot become the closest of all friends with the noble Gianfigliazza family. Indeed, that lovely Ginevra is always putting on some kind of charity event, which is a very acceptable pastime for a young, rich married woman the likes of Lucrezia Donati. And this would require her to spend ample time at the

Antica Torre in Santa Trinità. Are you hearing me, my boy?”

Lorenzo nodded. He didn’t like it, but it was beginning to sink in. He was learning every day to think and act more like a Medici.

That night, Lorenzo went home and put ink to page, working through his sadness through his art, which was his poetry. He wrote the early lines of what would become known as one of his greatest works, a poem called “Triumph.”

*How sweet is youth
But it does quickly speed away!
Let he who would be happy, be so
Because tomorrow is so uncertain.
Tomorrow is so uncertain.*



Cosimo had been ailing for a very long time. The gout, which was the great curse of Medici men for many generations, had taken its toll as it invaded his body during the last year, making movement of any kind difficult. He was irritable with his discomfort, but more with the idea that there was still so much to do and so little time left in which to do it.

When Cosimo knew that the end was very near, he gathered his family around him at the villa in Careggi, one at a time, to say his good-byes—and to issue his final instructions. Cosimo’s dearest and most trusted friend, Poggio Bracciolini, was a co-creator of the Platonic community in Florence as well as a key member of the Order. He and Cosimo had spent countless hours together over two decades, influencing Florentine society to become more learned, more tolerant, and more artistic. Together they were the essential humanists, and the inspiration of a new world, which was approaching through their leadership in Tuscany. Poggio came to read to him from the history of Florence that he had composed himself, in Latin.

“I have included you and your father in the book,” Poggio said. “And I shall dedicate this first edition to you, as you are the living history of Florence. It has been my joy to call myself your friend for all these years.”

Cosimo put a hand on Poggio’s as he replied, “The pleasure is all mine, as you have been a most loyal friend and brilliant companion in humanism and heresy. I pray that you will continue to encourage the friendship that grows between your Jacopo and my Lorenzo. I would have Lorenzo know the blessing and power of a Bracciolini friendship in his own life.”

Poggio Bracciolini promised to watch over the boys and encourage their

education together, that they might one day lead Florence under the human principles taught by both the Order and the Neoplatonists. Losing Cosimo would not only be personally painful for the Bracciolinis, it would be hard on everyone in the Florentine community who cared about social and artistic progress. Lorenzo would have to don quickly the mantle of the Medici if he wanted to preserve the legacy of his grandfather. Poggio hoped that his own brilliant son, Jacopo, would be at Lorenzo's side as the young Medici assumed the leadership role in Florence.

Poggio nodded to Marsilio Ficino, who was waiting at the door for his turn with Cosimo, and took his leave after kissing his dying friend on both cheeks, fighting the tears as he did so.

Ficino visited daily to read from the recently translated *Corpus Hermeticum*, the book of Egyptian wisdom that Cosimo loved so much. His body had failed him but his mind never would; until the last moment that Cosimo drew breath, he was gifted with extraordinary mental acuity. Following the readings with Ficino, they would discuss Lorenzo's future and the plans for their greater mission to merge the teachings of the ancient world with the lessons of the Order and bring them into the dawning golden age.

Cosimo spent the most time in his final days with Lorenzo. Some days their discussions were serious lessons on banking, politics, and the Medici agenda for the future. Other days, Cosimo wanted only to hear Lorenzo read from his latest writings. Even at this young age, his poetry was lyrical and substantive. He was growing into the poet aspect of his title. He was certainly the product of a gifted mother who had passed on her own talents and knew further how to nurture them in her child.

"No man has ever been more proud of a child than I am of you, my Lorenzo," Cosimo whispered on his last day of life. "You have already brought me so much joy. And I see your promise. But I also fear that you will need to become a man very quickly. Your father will need you immediately to become a Medici in full. He will handle the banking, but you ... it is for you to handle everything else, as he will no longer have the time. Work with Verrocchio, keep the school going, and guide the angelics. You have quite a stable building there now. Art will save the world, my boy. With Medici patronage."

Verrocchio's workshop was currently filled with brilliant and promising artists, all of whom had been identified and recruited by Cosimo and Piero. Sandro was, of course, the star of the Medici art roster, but there were some promising new additions. The young Domenico Ghirlandaio was showing great skill in fresco, and a lively rivalry was growing between him and Sandro. Together, with Lippi's son, Filippino, they were the enfants terribles

trio of the art world. A gifted new artist from Umbria had just been brought up, Pietro Vannucci, who was called Perugino after the town of his birth. And there was a boy in the southern town of Vinci who was getting some attention; Leonardo was his name. Lorenzo was going to have much to work with.

Taking his grandfather's hand and holding it in his, Lorenzo thanked him for all he had been given. He smiled at Cosimo, through dark eyes that filled with tears. "Grandfather," he began, choking on the sadness he held inside these final days. "Of all the gifts you have given me—the name, the teachings, the great education from the best teachers, all of it—do you know what I cherish above all? The times we have been together, just you and me. Taking walks in Careggi, talking about books, reading poetry. It is having you as my grandfather that I love above all things. And that I will miss above all else."

And with that Lorenzo wept uncontrollably as Cosimo pulled his beloved grandson close, stroking his sleek dark hair and weeping with him until he finally lost consciousness and slipped away.



The funeral of Cosimo de' Medici was an affair of state, with dignitaries arriving from all across Europe to honor the great man. Every citizen in Florence was in the streets that day, following the funeral procession that moved from the Medici palazzo on Via Larga toward San Lorenzo. The people chanted "*Palle, palle, palle*" in reference to the raised circles, or balls, that graced the Medici crest. Liveried servants wearing that same crest heralded the arrival of Cosimo's casket, which Lorenzo and his father shouldered as pallbearers, along with Medici cousins.

Andrea Verrocchio, who had been called in to quickly design the funerary monument to Cosimo de' Medici, presented drawings of a beautiful inlaid marble mosaic in the Order's official colors of red, white, and green, which would bear the simple yet remarkable epitaph:

PATER PATRIAE. FATHER OF THE COUNTRY.

For the first time since Cicero, an Italian citizen had been given the formal right to use that title.

Verrocchio would begin construction of the monument immediately following the interment of Cosimo de' Medici beneath the altar in San Lorenzo. He would work alone, as his old friend and great teacher, Donatello,

was so distraught at the loss of his patron that he vowed he would never work again.

“I wish only to be buried at the great Cosimo’s feet,” Donatello wailed that day, falling to his knees. He sobbed in the basilica as the casket holding his patron’s remains passed by him on the way to the final resting place. “I will find a way to serve him in heaven, to serve him for all eternity.”

True to his word, Donatello never sculpted again, and he appeared to lose all interest in his life, so deep was his devotion and mourning for his patron. Within two years of Cosimo’s death, he simply wasted away. In keeping with Donatello’s ultimate wish, he was buried beside his patron and friend, the great Cosimo de’ Medici, in the basilica of San Lorenzo.

Careggi
1464

LORENZO HAD FIRST seen the boy on the road from the Medici villa to Ficino’s retreat in Montevicchio but gave him little thought as he passed with a wave. Lorenzo was kind, of course, as he always was to the servants. And the boy had to be a servant, as no simple peasant would trespass this far into private Medici land. He did notice that this particular boy, close to Lorenzo’s own age if maybe a year or two younger, had a sweet face and a shy smile, but he must not have been hired by the family officially as yet. His clothes were shabby and he had clearly not been outfitted with the livery worn by the others within the Medici household. But a new stable boy was not something with which Lorenzo could occupy his busy mind, at least not today. He had far too many things to discuss with Ficino, not the least of which was the sublime poetry he had just discovered by a new and as yet unknown Tuscan writer.

A messenger had arrived in Florence the day before with a manuscript from the hilltop village called Montepulciano. In it was a letter of praise to Lorenzo and the Medici household from a man called Angelo Ambrogini, who claimed that his father had died in the service of Cosimo some years earlier. The man indicated, with remarkable elegance in the writing, that he wished to come to Florence to serve the family as his father once did. While Lorenzo processed many such requests claiming undying loyalty to the Medici, this particular one arrested him like nothing had previously. Enclosed with the letter was a collection of poems, the quality of which he had never seen. The poet, this Angelo, was well named; he was clearly one of the angelics, a being with supernatural talent in a human form. He wrote in both Latin and the Tuscan dialect, as did Dante and Boccaccio—and Lorenzo. He made references to Greek, linguistically and allegorically, that were fluent and literate and completely novel in their approach.

Lorenzo had never been so excited by a single letter before. For while his family and the Order searched for angelic contributors who would preserve truth and beauty through art, they had not encountered anyone truly special within the field of literature. There had been no new Dante appearing on the horizon. Until now.

Discovering who this angel from Montepulciano was, where he had obtained such a stellar education, and how to bring him into the fold was Lorenzo's primary objective today. As he dismounted, carefully extracting his treasured new manuscript from his satchel, he heard the sardonic voice of his childhood friend behind him.

"Did you study?"

Jacopo Bracciolini had continued to share Lorenzo's lessons with Ficino, whenever their schedules allowed. But since his father, Poggio, had promised Cosimo on his deathbed to encourage the friendship between his son and Lorenzo, they had been together more frequently. A rivalry had grown between the two boys, as both were naturally brilliant, competitive, and raised in the households of men who were renowned for their academic genius.

Lorenzo smacked his own forehead with the heel of his palm. He had forgotten that Ficino was expecting them both to recite the text of *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus* today. And while Lorenzo loved the Hermetic studies, he hated memorization for its own sake. And he had been so distracted by the elegant poetry that arrived the night before, he had completely forgotten that they would be examined today.

The Emerald Tablet was a legendary artifact from antiquity, believed to contain the encoded secrets of the universe. These were inscribed on a large slab of green stone by the great god Hermes himself. There was a tale from antiquity that the Great Pyramid of Giza was built to house the teachings of Hermes, known to Egyptians by another name, Thoth. This fabled artifact of untold power was once kept there within the King's Chamber. The original tablet had been long since lost to humanity, although Cosimo sent messengers around the world, in vain, to see if there was any trace of it. He spent the equivalent of several fortunes in search of the lost treasure of Hermes.

The closest Cosimo ever got to the legendary green tablet was a document from the tenth century discovered near Constantinople, a translation in Latin of the original writings. What language Hermes inscribed into the original Emerald Tablet was also one of history's mysteries. It was likely a symbolic language, something ancient and lost to mankind. And yet some of the text had been handed down as an oral tradition for untold centuries.

It was this tenth-century Latin translation of the oral tradition that the boys

had been charged to memorize in advance of today's lesson. It was a beautiful afternoon, and the sun shone on the paving stones leading to Ficino's cottage. They sat on a carved wooden bench beneath an arch of white roses framed by potted orange trees; the symbol of the Medici, these trees appeared in profusion on every property owned by the family. Today they were in bloom, and the sweet smell of orange blossoms gave the air a hint of magic.

Lorenzo laughed. "Uh, no. I didn't study. But I think I know it well enough to get by without too much of Ficino's frowning. You?"

Jacopo began the memorization test, to see if Lorenzo could, indeed, keep up with the lesson today.

"*'Tabula Smaragdina. Verum, sine mendacio, certum et verissimum ...'*"

Lorenzo translated instantly. " 'The Emerald Tablet. Truly, without deceit, certainly and absolutely ...' " He threw the next line back at Jacopo. " '*Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unius.*' "

Jacopo smiled smugly as he translated. " 'That which is below corresponds to that which is above, and that which is above corresponds to that which is below, in the accomplishment of the miracle of the one thing.' "

He began to toss the next lines back to Lorenzo, never hesitating. " '*Pater eius est Sol. Mater eius est Luna. Portavit illud Ventus in ventre suo.*' "

" 'Its Father is the Sun. Its Mother is the Moon. The Wind has carried it in his belly.' "

Lorenzo stopped short, suddenly realizing that he couldn't remember the next line. He paused, reaching hard in his memory to find the missing line and win the game. He was chewing on his lip, deep in thought, when a third voice entered the challenge. It was an unknown voice, of a younger boy, causing them both to jump as he spoke from behind them.

" '*Nutrix eius Terra est.* Its nourishment is the Earth.' "

Lorenzo gasped when he saw that the voice—and the flawless Latin—came from the lips of the dusty stable boy he had passed on the road as he traveled here today. The boy lowered his eyes shyly but managed to add, "I love that line. It is so beautiful. Such a reminder of how the Earth nourishes us with her beauty."

Lorenzo held out his hand and introduced himself to the boy, who took it and grasped it gently. His huge bright eyes, eyes that had seen so much for

one so young, filled with tears as he said, “I know who you are.”

Lorenzo did not release the boy’s hand. Instead, he clasped his shoulder with his other and said, “Then I am at a disadvantage, as I do not know who this brother is facing me, who has such a gift of knowledge and poetry for one so young.”

The boy was in tears now and fell to his knees weeping at Lorenzo’s feet. “I have come to serve you, Lorenzo. And to study with the maestro Ficino if he will have me.”

Jacopo Bracciolini rolled his eyes in exasperation at the sycophant. “Get up, boy. He’s neither king nor pope, but mere Medici.” He took one arm and Lorenzo the other as they raised the young man gently to his feet.

“What is your name, brother? And where do you come from?” Lorenzo asked gently.

Pushing his heavy hair out of his face and wiping his eyes, the young stranger answered softly.

“Angelo. My name is Angelo Ambrogini, and I come from Montepulciano.”



“Ah, I see you boys have met. Wonderful. Now we can get started in earnest. A good thing too, as the great Hermes does not like to be kept waiting.”

Marsilio Ficino, just out of sight, had been watching the exchange between the newcomer Angelo Ambrogini and his elder charges. He was pleased that Lorenzo immediately accepted the boy, and he hoped that Jacopo would do so too, as he needed the stimulation of equally brilliant minds. And there were few minds that could claim equality with this young man. Ficino had been watching Angelo for years now, at the suggestion of Cosimo. His father had been murdered in a blood feud, stabbed brutally in front of Angelo when he was a little boy. The Ambrogini family had been devoted servants to the Medici for two generations. At a time when Cosimo was in exile and the feuds were raging in Florence, the Medici patriarch had stayed with the family in Montepulciano. While there, he had an opportunity to observe the shy yet obviously brilliant little boy who was already showing a prodigal intellect. Cosimo discussed the child’s aptitudes with his father and was stunned to learn that he was already conversant in Latin and a natural with Greek. It was as if Lorenzo had a twin brother, born a few years later across Tuscany.

Following the brutal execution of his father, Angelo received an education secretly provided by Cosimo—and supervised by Ficino. Before falling ill, Cosimo had intended to bring the young Angelo to Florence and integrate him into the Medici household. Circumstances interfered, and the brilliant young intellect began to languish in the wilds of Tuscany. When Angelo wrote to Ficino in desperation, the tutor had the letters forwarded to Lorenzo. Ficino spoke nothing of it in advance, preferring to watch how Lorenzo filled Cosimo's shoes as the ultimate patron of the arts. Would he recognize angelic talent from the outset? Was he truly the equal—if not the superior—to his grandfather when it came to discovering and cultivating talent?

Ficino was thrilled to see that, at the tender age of fifteen, Lorenzo was well able to fill the unique role that he alone could aspire to. He was, indeed, growing to become the Poet Prince in every sense of the title.

Lorenzo and Jacopo were staring at Ficino now, blinking at his revelation that he had been expecting Angelo all along. Ficino smiled and ushered them through the door, as Sandro Botticelli joined them for the lesson, nodding to Jacopo as he entered and introducing himself to Angelo. Sandro knew that every minute he could spend with Ficino made him a better painter, as he acquired more storytelling elements to weave into his artwork. He attended the lessons with Ficino whenever possible. And while Sandro wasn't especially fond of the arrogant Bracciolini heir, he could feel from the electricity in the room that today was a lesson not to be missed.

“Come on, then, boys. The Tabula Smaragdina awaits us.”

Ficino ushered them all into the larger antechamber that served as his lesson hall. He repeated the memorization test that Jacopo and Lorenzo had been practicing in the garden. While both boys passed the exam, neither was as quick or as fluent as Angelo Ambrogini, either in memorization or in understanding the context.

“‘That which is above is also below,’ ” Ficino said. “What is another way in which we can—and often do—say those words?”

Lorenzo answered this, immediately. “On earth as it is in heaven.”

“Precisely,” Ficino replied. “And what does this tell us, about the correlation between the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teachings of the ancients?”

“That it is all correlation and no separation,” Jacopo replied. This was Ficino's favorite theory, and all his students knew it well.

“And?” Ficino looked to Angelo. He was curious with anticipation to see where the boy would take these two in discussion. While Jacopo and Lorenzo

were both brilliant, they had developed a pattern of interaction between the two of them that was often more about their rivalry than about the lessons. Sandro was a quiet student and rarely spoke during the lessons. An extra intellect added to the mix would be just what Lorenzo needed to push him to the next level of learning.

Angelo looked at his classmates and hesitated. He was the newcomer, and the youngest. He was also heavily outranked socially and was highly unsure of his position. Lorenzo sensed this and encouraged him.

“Go on. Tell us what you think, Angelo.”

“I think it doesn’t matter.” He spoke softly but firmly, and the others, teacher and students, were silent with shock at his eloquence as he continued.

“All wisdom comes from God and is the truth. It matters not if it comes from Hermes or from Jesus, or who said it first or in what language it was spoken. This is why the Emerald Tablet opens with the words ‘Truly, without Deceit, certainly and absolutely.’ Because that is the nature of all divine law.”

Ficino questioned him. “And does this mean that Jesus was a student of the Emerald Tablet? That he was aware of Greek teachings? And is such a thing heresy?”

“I am not a priest and I cannot tell you what is or is not heresy,” Angelo replied simply. “But I say again that it does not matter if Jesus obtained his wisdom from a Hellenist philosopher or from God himself. The pure and perfect truth of life is that we are here to create heaven on earth, to bring the perfection of what is above down to us, and in doing so to become transformed as human beings into something great and beautiful.”

Lorenzo was leaning toward Angelo now, completely attuned to what he was saying. He jumped in. “To become fully *anthropos*.” He explained quickly to Angelo, “Fully human, our most perfected state. To become fully realized is to know who you are and what you are here to do, to consciously and actively fulfill your promise to God and yourself, and to find the others in your soul family and help them to do the same.”

“It is a Greek word, *anthropos*. I know it,” Angelo replied. “But I do not know it in the context in which you use it.”

“Then we shall have to teach you,” Lorenzo said. “Just as it appears that you must teach us.”

Sandro had been silent through the lesson, although it was clear to Lorenzo, who knew him better than anyone, that he had been sketching all

along. Sandro turned the page to reveal his pencil drawing to Angelo. He had sketched the boy as Hermes himself, looking up to heaven. In one hand he held a staff, and he appeared to be stirring the clouds with it.

Angelo blushed at the beauty of the drawing. “You honor me by comparing me to Hermes.”

“I sketch what I see, brother. And what I see is your brilliance, alerting us below about the truth of the above, but I also see you stirring things up a bit in flaccid Florence! That, incidentally, is a delightful element.”

Jacopo Bracciolini appeared annoyed at all the fawning over the newcomer but held his tongue. The Medici were famous for adopting stray poets and philosophers as pets.

“Welcome to our family of spirit, brother,” Lorenzo said, grasping Angelo’s hands. The younger boy was determined not to weep again, but for the first time since the death of his father, Angelo Ambrogini felt something akin to joy.

As the lesson continued, Marsilio Ficino felt a thrill run up his spine. He was not a prophet, but he had seen enough of the world to know that, in the presence of these three shining lights—the prince, the painter, and the poet—he was truly on the threshold of a new era. Florence was about to be reborn, and all of Italy would follow, and perhaps even the rest of the world.

It was not lost on Ficino that Jacopo Bracciolini, as brilliant as he was, stood apart and separated from this stunning trinity by his own choosing. Jacopo, despite his exceptional father, did not share in the special sense of family that was growing here. He was a young man of great cerebral gifts, but Ficino had watched him carefully over the years. He had noticed that while Jacopo fully engaged his agile brain, he seemed completely unable to connect with his heart.

Florence
1467

COLOMBINA RUSHED TO the entrance hall, her heart in her throat. Her sister, Costanza, had been breathless in her announcement that the mysterious Fra Francesco had come calling to the Donati town house. What was he doing here in her parents’ house? Surely this was not official Order business? Could something be wrong with Lorenzo?

“Maestro! You honor us with your presence here. What brings you?”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

His relaxed demeanor relieved her, and she smiled warmly at the old man.

“You are far too great a man to be a good liar.”

He returned the smile and shrugged simply. “And you are too young to be so wise. But as you are, I shall tell you the truth. Did you know, that when you stand on the Ponte Santa Trinità at precisely midday, the sun shines perfectly on the center of the Ponte Vecchio? And what a coincidence; it is almost midday now.”

Colombina winked at him. “A good Florentine girl must know such things. I shall get my cape, and you can show me.”



Colombina and Fra Francesco strolled along the Arno, through the Lungarni district that lined the river, toward the bridge at Santa Trinità. Santa Trinità had become a code for the Order, given its associations with the earliest days of the Order in Florence: it was where the current members attended secret services that celebrated their precious traditions. When Santa Trinità was mentioned, there was surely secrecy to be kept.

The Master gently approached the delicate subject. “I have heard that your father wants you betrothed. Soon.”

Colombina nodded simply. “Yes, and not to Lorenzo.”

“You expected as much.”

“Yes, Maestro. I have always known that I would not be allowed to marry Lorenzo. It is not ... our destiny.”

“Mmm. And what have we taught you about destiny, child?”

“That the stars guide us, but they do not compel us. It is our free will that determines the outcome of all things. God does not impose his will on us, rather he makes it known and allows us to choose if we will follow it.”

“And what is the Latin phrase that represents this idea?”

“*Elige magistrum*. Choose a master.”

“Correct, and well spoken. So who is your master? Your heart? Lorenzo’s destiny? God’s will? The future of Florence? Where are you in this situation?”

Colombina gazed out at the river. The midday sun was indeed sparkling off the river and shining toward the venerable Ponte Vecchio, just as Fra Francesco had said it would. Even in such details, he was never mistaken.

“God has made his destiny for Lorenzo known since the day he was born.

Since before he was born. My own parents have been straightforward with their attitudes about my future. They believe that I can only marry into an equally aristocratic family, and the Medici must stay out of the way. Our free will is to determine if we can live with that decision or not. We must choose.”

Fra Francesco nodded sagely. “Yet Lorenzo speaks to me—quite seriously—of eloping. He would choose love and abandon his destiny. He would throw away everything he has and is to be with you.”

“No, he would not. And I wouldn’t allow him to do so, even if he meant it, which he doesn’t.”

Her tears came fast, hot and unbidden. She pulled her cape over her face and wept for a moment.

“Oh, Maestro, it is so hard. I want to be strong for Lorenzo, but the idea of him wed to another woman makes me want to leap from this bridge. We dream of being together, of escaping the responsibilities of his destiny, but we both know that we would never do such a thing. He will follow in the steps of Pater Patriae, as certain as he is Cosimo’s grandson and a January-born prince.”

“Both circumstances you mention are God-given, and therefore part of divine will and Lorenzo’s destiny. What does that dictate for his nature as a result?”

Lucrezia wiped her face as she composed herself, ever mindful of pleasing her teacher.

“He is ruled by Saturn, the planet of obedience and sacrifice, the planet of the father and fatherhood. His first priority is and will always be his family and related obligations. And as Cosimo’s heir, he has ... all of that to carry on, in addition to the ruling of Florence. Lorenzo will always sacrifice his personal happiness to fulfill his responsibilities. *Semper*. Always.”

“Yes, my child. He will. God knew what he was doing when Lorenzo was born on that date and at that time. He gave Florence a prince who would certainly not fail his destiny. But I can see that he also gave us a princess who would be equally strong and brave in fulfilling her own.

“For you see, my sweet child, this is as much about your destiny as it is Lorenzo’s, and why you were born on the equinox, on the cusp of Pisces and Aries, the alpha-omega point of the zodiac, the beginning and the end. Pisces gives you the deep subconscious awareness to hear clearly and to feel at uncommon depths. Aries gives you the strength, determination, and fearlessness to move forward with your mission, even when it is very difficult to do so.”

Colombina nodded the acceptance of her own role in this grand drama that belonged to God. "I will not fail him. I will not fail Florence, and I will not fail ... our beliefs." She looked pointedly back in the direction of Santa Trinità, and the stone tower of the Gianfigliazza family that stood beside the monastery with its beautiful church, before finishing her thought. "The work of the Order means more to me than anything now. It must come first. But Maestro, there are days when all of this hurts very, very much."

"I know, my dear. I know. And I came here to tell you what Cosimo's final words were to me, regarding you."

Colombina gasped. "Pater Patriae? Mentioned *me* when he was dying?"

"Oh yes, my dear. He said to tell you and Lorenzo that what God has put together, no man can separate. And so while you are unable to marry within the laws of man, you are free to do what you wish within the laws of God."

Colombina was stunned. Surely he wasn't suggesting ...

Fra Francesco looked in the direction of Santa Trinità. "Ginevra Gianfigliazza has the key. I can deliver Lorenzo there to you tomorrow night. Secret marriages are something of a tradition in the Order, after all."

Of course he referred to the most infamous of the secret weddings, that of Matilda of Tuscany to Pope Gregory VII. It was a legend in Tuscany, and one of the sacred stories of the Order.

Colombina sputtered, not knowing what to say. She threw her arms around him and began to cry, thanking him profusely.

"You are welcome, my dear. And for the future, on the days when it looks very dark, I want you to know that I will always be there for you. For both of you. *Semper*. And remember this most of all: when it is darkest, that is when you can see the stars most clearly."

Santa Trinità, Florence
1467

THE CHURCH THAT had served as a secret center of the Order since the days of Matilda glowed in the dim light of a dozen candles. They had chosen to perform the ceremony quietly in one of the small side chapels, the one with the glorious depiction of Jesus crowning his beloved, Mary Magdalene, as his wife and his queen. Lorenzo and Colombina stood together in the central space facing each other, joined together by outstretched hands, while the Master stood to one side, with the Libro Rosso open to a page from the Book of Love. He appeared to read from it, although he did not need to, as he knew

these words by heart and had for more years than he could remember.

Having been instructed in the ceremony earlier by the Master in an impromptu rehearsal on the way into Florence from Careggi, Lorenzo recited to Colombina the poem of Maximinus with all of his love.

*I have loved you before
I love you today
And I will love you again.
The time returns.*

Tears streamed down Colombina's porcelain face as she repeated these same words to Lorenzo, in a whisper. No matter what happened from this day forward, the two of them were united by God.

Once the vows were completed, Ginevra Gianfigliazza, an esteemed teacher of the Order who was known as the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos, began to sing a French troubadour song about love that the legendary Matilda had included in her own secret wedding ceremony to Pope Gregory VII. Ginevra's voice was sweet and clear as she sang:

*I have loved thee a long time
I will never forget thee...
God has made us one for the other.*

When Ginevra finished the song, the Master invited the two to exchange the traditional nuptial gifts: small gilded mirrors, which had been found quickly by Ginevra in time for the ceremony. Fra Francesco recited one of the sacred teachings of union as they did so.

"In your reflection, you will find what you seek. As you two become One, you will find God reflected in the eyes of your beloved, and your beloved reflected in your own eyes."

The Master concluded the ceremony with the beautiful words from the Book of Love, those that are also included in the gospel of Matthew: "For no longer are you two, but you are one in spirit and in flesh. And what God has put together, let no man separate."

He turned to Lorenzo. "The bridegroom may now gift the bride with the *nashakh*, the sacred kiss that blends together the spirits in union."

Lorenzo was weeping as he wrapped Colombina in his arms and pulled her tightly against him. What should have been their most joyous moment was one filled with deep sadness. For while he knew that no one but Colombina would ever be the bride of his heart, he also knew that the dawn would come too soon, and they would be separated by the cruel realities they had been

born into. Their marriage would be valid only to them, in their hearts. It would not matter when they left this room. It was a secret for them alone, a little bit of rebellion wherein they could hold on to the truth of their love for each other: no matter what fate forced them into, they would know that they were secretly joined in a spiritual union that only God could undo.

But there was still some bliss awaiting the young couple. They would spend the night in the Antica Torre, the home of the Gianfigliazza family, where the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos would instruct them both, before closing the door and leaving them to their privacy. The Gianfigliazza were one of the wealthiest and most esteemed families in Tuscany, therefore Colombina's parents did not hesitate when Ginevra had requested that Lucrezia stay with her in their legendary family home for a night. It was a coveted social invitation that the savvy Donati would never deny.

And so it was that Lorenzo and Colombina joined together that night, married in the eyes of God and each other, combining their spirits through their flesh. Both wept with the joy and the ecstasy of their love, swearing through their tears that nothing would ever separate them.

The Libro Rosso was very clear on the teachings of Solomon and Sheba: "Once the hieros-gamos is consummated between predestined souls, the lovers are never apart in their spirits."

*The Uffizi Gallery, Florence
present day*

MAUREEN GASPED AS she entered the enormous salon known as the Botticelli Room, the centerpiece of the Uffizi collection. It was overwhelming, filled as it was with the most exquisite and iconic paintings of the Renaissance. In the middle of the room was an island of ottomans, providing a place to sit in awed contemplation.

"Remember, today we are not tourists, and we will not try to take in and understand each and every painting in this room. That is a fool's errand. Each of these paintings deserves many days all on its own, filled as they are with knowledge, intention, and emotion. So as much as you are tempted to wander and take it all in, I beg you not to do so. I promise that we will return every day that you are here and continue the lessons with new paintings each day. You will be better off for this approach. You must believe me."

Tammy gulped and nudged Maureen. To be in this room and not see every work of art, even peripherally, would be a type of torture for all of them.

Maureen said, "In this room you get an awesome sense of how

accomplished the man must have been, how committed. To create this much art in one lifetime is astonishing. It seems impossible.”

“And it is only a portion of what Sandro created,” Destino answered. “He was more prolific than most people know. A truly angelic being in a man’s body. In his life he created close to two hundred paintings. In contrast, Leonardo da Vinci completed perhaps fifteen. And yet the average person will throw Leonardo’s name around as the greatest Renaissance artist! It is a crime.”

Destino was rarely emphatic, so they all were stunned to hear him disparage Leonardo in this way. “It is our duty to right the wrongs of history, and the lack of appreciation of Botticelli’s true genius is one of them,” the ancient one responded to their incredulous expressions. “I will tell you—and show you—more on this. Come over here.”

He moved the group to stand before Botticelli’s *Annunciation*. Annunciation paintings were very popular in medieval and Renaissance Italy, capturing the moment in the gospel of Luke wherein the archangel Gabriel appears to tell the Holy Mother that she is going to give birth to the Son of God.

The Madonna in Botticelli’s masterpiece was graceful beyond reason—elegant and strong, yet clearly filled with humility at the moment of divine annunciation. The archangel Gabriel, exalted though he might have been in heaven, was on his knees before Mary in honor of her grace and position.

“Stand in front of this painting, just here.” Destino guided them all to the best place in which to feel the essence of the image. “Allow yourself to feel the power of this moment. Don’t admire this art with just your eyes. Admire it with your heart and your spirit. Let it whisper to your soul. It was created in such a way as to do all of those things, for those with ears to hear.”

They all stood before the *Annunciation*, experiencing it in this new way. Destino watched them all closely, noticing that Roland and Maureen immediately connected. Both of them had tears in their eyes as the enormity of the moment, captured perfectly by Botticelli, began to move through them. Tammy and Peter were not far behind. In a matter of two minutes, all of them were in different stages of weeping.

“Art is experience. When it is created by an angelic force, it transcends the visual and becomes entirely visceral. Yes?”

“Yes,” Maureen whispered, still caught up in the moment expressed in the art before her, the moment when a woman accepts the enormity of her promise to bring forth the savior of the world and all that will mean to her—

and to mankind.

“Now while you are in this state of bliss, follow me carefully into this next room. We shall perform a comparison.”

They moved across the Botticelli salon and into the adjacent Room 15. On the far wall was another annunciation painting. It was beautiful, undoubtedly, but of a very different nature than the Botticelli piece.

“Now stand here, before this painting, and tell me what you feel.”

They all admired the beautiful piece but were unable to reclaim the sense of bliss and connection they had felt from Botticelli’s art.

“I feel nothing,” Peter said. “Intellectually, I see that it is beautiful and I can admire it as an accomplishment, but it evokes no feeling in me.”

The others nodded. Maureen added, “It lacks emotion. The Madonna here is beautiful, but she appears to be made out of marble. She is cold, disconnected. I don’t feel anything from her.”

In this version of the annunciation, Mary had a book before her in a stand, and her hand was resting on it as if to hold her place in the passage.

Tammy observed, “It looks as if she is more concerned about losing her place in the book, as if the angel interrupted her and she is just waiting for him to leave so she can finish her reading!”

“It is also missing the reverence for Our Lady,” Roland commented. “Here, Gabriel appears to be a stronger character, or at least her equal. There is no sense of Mary as the focus of grace here.”

Destino nodded. “One cannot communicate what one has never felt. This artist did not revere women and did not have any kind of emotional attachment to the idea of the annunciation. And so while it is executed perfectly in terms of technical merit, it does not teach you anything, it does not affect you emotionally or spiritually, nor does it move you.”

“Whereas with Botticelli,” Maureen interjected, “You feel his love for the subject and for the woman he is painting.”

“Sandro loved and revered women. He was passionately committed to celebrating the divinity of femininity. This is part of what you feel in his work, but why this other artist’s work leaves you cold.”

“Who is this artist?” Tammy and Maureen asked at the same time.

Destino delivered the point he had begun to make in the Botticelli room. “I have shown you the art of Sandro Botticelli and the work of Leonardo da

Vinci. One was a technical genius, the other was an angelic master. Now you know the difference.”

Destino shepherded them all back into the Botticelli room and now took them around the perimeter, indicating a series of different Madonnas, all of which had the similar tilting of the head, porcelain skin, and light hazel eyes. A glass case in the center of the room contained two small paintings of the life of the Old Testament heroine Judith, after she had slain and decapitated the giant called Holofernes who terrorized her people. The same beautiful girl had clearly modeled for the fierce Judith in this work.

“All Colombina?” Maureen asked. When Destino nodded, Maureen asked, “Why is it that we never hear of her? Someone who inspired so much of Botticelli’s work? These paintings obviously depict the same model when you look closely at them.”

“Two reasons,” Destino replied. “The first is that everything about our Colombina was too controversial for history to record. The second is that Botticelli later discovered another, more famous muse who overshadowed all others.”

He moved them all to stand before one of the most iconic paintings in the history of art. In *The Birth of Venus*, a naked goddess of beauty arrives on earth, standing on a scallop shell as her golden hair floats over her body.

“My friends, allow me to introduce you to a sister from the past, Simonetta di Cattaneo Vespucci. But you may call her Bella, as we all did back then.”

IN A FAMILY renowned for the beauty of its women, the young Simonetta Cattaneo was the crowning glory. There had never been a girl so lovely, so exquisite of both feature and coloring. Her hair was the one element of her appearance that everyone remarked upon: by the age of ten, it hung to her waist in thick, apricot waves, a stunning golden peach color, not quite red, yet not blond in any traditional sense. Like all else about the young woman who was known by the nickname of *la Bella*, “the Beauty,” her eyes also complied with God’s command that everything about Simonetta be unequaled by any woman alive. They were a nearly translucent blue with coppery flecks, and they sparkled with the sweetness of her good humor.

Simonetta’s skin was uncommon for an Italian woman, even one of such storied lineage. It was the color of rich cream, dotted gracefully with soft freckles in strategic places on her body and face. Her family referred to these as “angel kisses,” for they were like sweet punctuation marks that highlighted the beauty bestowed upon her by the divine. She was tall, even as a child, lithe of limb and slender, moving with the grace of a willow tree in the first breezes of spring.

And yet for all her physical perfection, Simonetta was equally flawless of character. She was a gentle girl, and deeply sensitive. For many years into the future, her mother would tell the story of hearing her daughter crying on a spring afternoon, then searching for her with rising desperation as she heard Simonetta’s sobs increase. She found her daughter weeping uncontrollably in the rose garden, as she sat amid a sea of colorful blooms. Roses in sunset shades of reds and oranges blossomed all around her, set against a sea of smaller white blossoms. There were butterflies in the garden this day, large yellow wings with black patterns flitting over Simonetta’s head. The scene was idyllic and beautiful, and the lovely young woman with the gleaming apricot hair had her face lifted to the sun. She wept uncontrollably.

“What is wrong, my child?”

Madonna Cattaneo ran to her daughter, wrapping her arms around her as the girl’s body shook against her own. The girl fought through her tears to speak.

“Is ... isn’t it so beautiful?” Simonetta cried, pulling away from her mother to gesture around the garden. “The flowers, the butterflies. All that God has created for us. Could anything be more beautiful than this? How blessed we must be for God to love us so much!”

The child Simonetta wept with the joy of God's creation, and for the beauty of the world. She remained pure in her appreciation of the precious nature of life on earth, every day of her existence. That loveliness from her inner being radiated, shining forth as a beacon of light that would one day touch the world, influencing millions for centuries into the future. But on that day in the garden, Simonetta's role as the future muse who would represent the Renaissance was being decided for her.

Her parents had just the night before been weighing their options for their daughter's marriage. She was a Cattaneo, which was enough to command a strong match anywhere in Italy. But that she was exquisitely beautiful with it was a benefit beyond florins and jewels. Beauty was necessary for landing a marriage within one of the strategic Florentine families. Marrying into Florence was no easy task for a foreign family; it was a culture that demanded beauty, intelligence, and wit in their women, in addition to hefty dowries and family connections. It was easy enough to marry off a plain girl into Rome or the outer regions of Lombardy if the money and paternal influence were there. Not so in Florence.

The Cattaneo family was the royalty of the ancient city of Genoa. They were descended from a storied Roman dynasty, one in which the women played a secret yet powerful role. They were teachers and healers, prophetesses with a hidden legacy of prayer and traditions that harkened back to the earliest days of Christianity. The Cattaneo women wore a symbol woven into their clothes and etched into their jewelry to represent this legacy. It was a pattern of stars set in a circle, dancing around a central sun. It was the symbol of Mary Magdalene, called the Magdalene's seal, and it had been used by women in the Order of the Holy Sepulcher for almost fifteen hundred years.

The family were members of the Order descended from the legendary early Christian leaders, Saint Peter and his many granddaughters named Petronella. It was this element of their family lineage that influenced the Cattaneos' decision. Simonetta's husband must come from Tuscany, where the Order was strongest, but more specifically from Florence. The Master had been consulted, of course. And while they had all considered marrying Simonetta into the Medici dynasty, Lorenzo was on the verge of a betrothal and Giuliano was being held in reserve for possible leadership within the Church. Thus it was determined that Marco Vespucci, the soft-spoken son of a wealthy and noble Tuscan dynasty, would be the best match for Simonetta. He was gentle, as she was, and a scholar. His family fortune and properties would ensure that this unique Cattaneo treasure would be well cared for and protected. Any children

from the pairing would be of the most noble combination of bloodlines and likely to be both beautiful and intelligent.

And so it was that on the day that Simonetta Cattaneo wept for the beauty of God's creation, her parents made the decision to send her to Florence. She would study there with the Order and with the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos, Ginevra Gianfigliazza, in preparation for her marriage to Marco Vespucci. The Cattaneo family were happy to discover that Simonetta would not be entirely alone during her preparation. A daughter of the Donati family, also renowned for her beauty of both body and spirit, would be waiting to greet their Simonetta as a "sister." With the grace of the Father and Mother in heaven, the girls would become friends and the Cattaneos' precious daughter would not be lonely so far away from the flowers and butterflies she loved so much.



La Bella Simonetta.

Even her name is art, one that I whisper as I paint even all these years after she has left us.

Will I ever capture her as she deserved? Perfectly and totally as the pure, yet real, living example of beauty that she was?

I remember the first time I saw her, at the Antica Torre, in the celebration that the Order created to welcome her to Florence. I could neither breathe nor speak when I looked upon her for the first hours that I was in her presence. Surely such ethereal magic could not exist in flesh and blood. And make no mistake, this was not mere physical perfection, although she was all of that and more. It was her radiance, her divine sweetness, that I knew would haunt me until the end of time, until I captured it perfectly.

It is a quest without end. Capturing Simonetta is the goal I will never accomplish and will never cease to pursue.

And yet that night in the castle built by the Gianfigliazza family, I saw her not as singular perfection but as the completion of a trinity of the divine feminine essence that I had come to worship. On that magical evening I watched as Simonetta danced with Colombina and Ginevra. I sketched them as they moved together, more grateful than I had ever been in all my years to have my sketching tools with me.

I saw that these three women each represented an aspect of female divinity and then sketched them as such: Simonetta was purity, Colombina was beauty, and Ginevra was pleasure. Together, they were the three graces,

dancing hand in hand as sisters, representing love in its earthly forms.

I would never forget that night for as long as I lived, and I vowed to paint the three of them together like that in some way that would capture the magic these women bestowed upon us. Lorenzo was in attendance, as was Giuliano, and both were equally entranced by the beauty that surrounded us. We were a family of spirit, immersed in the mission we were devoted to, while delirious with gratitude for the perfection of the world.

How fleeting such beauty is, how temporary. All the more reason for us to love it, revere it, and celebrate it in any way we can while it is with us.

I remain,

Alessandro di Filipepi, known as “Botticelli”

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*The Uffizi Gallery, Florence
present day*

“NO PRIMAVERA.” Destino was firm. “Not today. Later.”

Maureen, Peter, Tammy, and Roland were rebellious. They were here, in the Botticelli salon, where one wall was dominated by the enormous, mural-like masterwork of Botticelli’s career known most commonly as *Primavera*, or *The Allegory of Spring*. It was a painting they all loved so much that Bérenger had a replica of the same enormous size installed in the château. To tell them that they were not even permitted to go and look at it up close seemed almost cruel, if not silly. How could it hurt?

“Find your spiritual discipline, my children. If this is the harshest task I ask of you on this path, you should all be grateful.”

There was humor in Destino’s voice, but the point was made. If their greatest spiritual trial was that they couldn’t get an up-close look at a painting, they needed to count their blessings.

“You do not yet have all the information you need to appreciate what *Primavera* truly is in its entirety. I assure you it will mean far more and have the lasting impact that it was meant to have if you will allow yourselves to wait. Some things are sweeter for the waiting, and this is one of them.

“But to take away the sting, let us look at the *Madonna of the Magnificat*.”

They followed Destino to the painting, which had been commissioned by Lucrezia Tornabuoni for her twentieth wedding anniversary with Piero de’ Medici. Destino pointed out the various angels and explained which of the Medici children had posed for each as they all listened intently. On Maureen’s left, a young woman was inching up, clearly trying to hear the commentary.

She was young and striking, with close-cropped dark hair and huge doe eyes. She was extremely thin, which was the fashion at the moment with younger people in Italy, and wore jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. Maureen also noticed that she wore black leather gloves and carried a notebook—or possibly a sketchpad—and a pen. *She must be an Italian art student*, Maureen thought, but paid little attention, as she was listening to Destino.

Destino was answering a question for Roland when the girl in the gloves tapped Maureen lightly on the shoulder. She surprised Maureen by speaking to her in excellent English, with a slight British accent.

“I have heard that some believe this is Mary Magdalene and not the Virgin Mary,” the girl said.

Maureen smiled and shrugged, noncommittal. “Well, she is the most beautiful Madonna I have ever seen, regardless of which one she is,” Maureen replied.

She was very careful in public not to become engaged in controversial conversation with strangers. This girl appeared harmless enough, and was very possibly one of her readers, given that Maureen was the author who had, in her first book on the subject, put forth the theory that this Madonna was, indeed, a representation of their Magdalena.

“The most beautiful Madonnas I have ever seen are Pontormo’s, from his deposition mural in the Church of Santa Felicita. Have you seen those?” The young woman gushed. “His Magdalene wears a pink veil, rather than a red one. She is stunning. And it is one of the few deposition paintings that contains Saint Veronica at the foot of the cross. You really should go see it if you have time. It is just across the river over the Ponte Vecchio, ten minutes’ walk from here.”

Maureen thanked the girl, always interested to discover some new and beautiful piece of artwork. No doubt Destino would know a few things about the Pontormo painting too. But the mention of Veronica was the most interesting to Maureen. Veronica was an important character in the legends of the Order, and yet she was often overlooked.

The young woman was ripping out a page of her notebook now, where she had written the address of the Church of Santa Felicita. She handed it to Maureen, who thanked her.

“My pleasure. Enjoy your stay in Florence,” she said sweetly, and with a wave of her gloved hand, she walked out of the Botticelli room without looking at one single piece of art.



Felicity de Pazzi's hands were shaking in her gloves as she ran out of the Uffizi. She had done it, she had forced contact with the wicked usurper, with her nemesis. It had been a strange sensation to be face-to-face with the woman she had conjured in her head as the Whore of Babylon, to see her as a flesh-and-blood person. Felicity was disappointed in retrospect. What had she been expecting? Something more ... demonic? No, Maureen Paschal was just an average woman, other than the hair color, which marked her as a part of the tainted bloodline.

But that was the trick, wasn't it? Satan was crafty. He would not put his spawn in the body of a recognizable demon. He would create her in the image of the everywoman, someone whom people could relate to so that she would be able to lure them in with her facile lies. Felicity must not, even for a moment, allow herself to underestimate the evil inherent in the Paschal bitch. She was a blasphemer, the tool of Satan.

Felicity hurried down the stairs and out the door into the heat of an early Tuscan afternoon, toward the bridge and Santa Trinità. She did not know if Maureen would take the bait, but she hoped she would. Meanwhile, there was a meeting of the Florentine chapter of the confraternity in the rectory there this afternoon. They would vote today to determine whether to pursue reopening the case to beatify the holiest monk of the Renaissance, or any time period as far as she was concerned, Girolamo Savonarola. Felicity intended to control that vote. When she was present, none in the organization would oppose her. And it was time to redeem the sacred name of their ancestor, the greatest reformer ever to live in Italy.

Felicity sighed as she stepped up her pace, correcting her own thoughts. The greatest reformer ever to live in Italy—so far.

*Ognissanti District
Florence
1468*

THE HAND OF God was often seen to work in the affairs of Lorenzo de' Medici. Fra Francesco taught that when one was living in harmony with one's promise to God, opportunity would appear and doors would open most effortlessly. This night was to be no exception in the life of Lorenzo.

The Taverna was an eating house in the Ognissanti district, not far from Sandro Botticelli's *bottega*. It was a regular meeting place for Lorenzo and Sandro, an escape where the two great friends could relax and talk about art and life in a vibrant, if somewhat tawdry, atmosphere. Lorenzo preferred it to

the more elegant Florentine establishments, where he was constantly under the microscope of political and social behavior. Here, he wasn't Florence's first son; he was just another patron. And the otherwise refined Lorenzo had an earthy side that gave him a secret taste for the bawdy and the ribald, one that he indulged in places such as this.

His little brother Giuliano, now fifteen, had tagged along with him today. It was his first experience in such a place, and no doubt Lucrezia de' Medici would be unhappy with Lorenzo for bringing her baby here. But Lorenzo felt that it was his duty to school Giuliano in the ways of the world. Besides, he was entirely safe with Lorenzo and Sandro at his side. Both men were tall, sturdy, and highly respected. Together, they were a formidable combination that no Florentine with any wits would ever cross.

A commotion at the bar drew the attention of all three in the Medici party. A darkly handsome man, preening and strutting from a cocktail of alcohol blended with attention, was being celebrated by his friends. The gaggle at the bar were getting louder as the time went by, the evident effects of too much drink. The peacock at the center of the group was telling a story with great gesticulation, punctuated by throwing money on the table in an ostentatious display of wealth, good fortune, and utter lack of taste. Lorenzo watched him carefully for a few minutes, eavesdropping on the boisterous conversation while his brother listened to Sandro discuss the details of his latest commission.

"A very typical Madonna and child. Not particularly interesting, but lucrative enough. I will add a forbidden element here or there to spice it up, a red book perhaps." He smiled wickedly, winking at Giuliano. "The tediously pious Catholics who commissioned it will never know the difference."

"You wouldn't!" Giuliano was in awe of Sandro and worshipped him as a god. He hung on every word, and Sandro embellished his stories to please his young audience.

"I would. I do it all the time. No one is any the wiser and it amuses me. Why do you think I dress them all in red? When I am amused in my work, I paint with more passion and perseverance, so in the end it is all the better for the client. Everybody wins."

Giuliano nudged Lorenzo, who was paying no attention to a conversation that he normally would have enjoyed immensely—art and heresy, a delicious and favored combination for all in the Medici household. Lorenzo shushed him and nudged Sandro. "Who is the braggadocio at the bar?"

Sandro craned his neck to get a better view, then grimaced with a theatrical shudder and grunted as he recognized the character in question. "The

monumentally annoying Niccolò Ardinghelli. He was insufferable even before he went off on a trade adventure with his uncle, but now he has the distinction of being completely unbearable. You would think he was one of the Argonauts and that he found the Golden Fleece, the way he goes on.”

“Well then, let’s call our pretentious Jason over here.”

Sandro pulled a terrible face. “Tell me you’re jesting. Please.”

“No, I’m not. Call him over.”

Seeing that Lorenzo was serious, Sandro conceded, grumbling. For all their fraternal friendship, Lorenzo was his prince and patron. The Medici had given him an order and he would obey it. Sandro bowed with a great mocking flourish. “As you wish, Magnifico. But you will owe me for this one.”

Sandro approached the crowd and was greeted by some of the men who recognized him, including Ardinghelli, who cried out, “Well, if it isn’t the Little Barrel himself!”

Sandro swallowed his irritation but corrected him quickly. “My brother is called Little Barrel, not me.”

Sandro’s brother, Antonio, was known by this unflattering nickname due to his physical stature, which was short and stocky. The younger of the Filipepi brothers, Sandro was far more gifted in the appearance department—tall, well built, with finer features and fairer hair. He had also grown terribly vain and intolerant of fools on top of it, so it rankled him that the moniker of Little Barrel, or Botticelli, appeared to be sticking firmly to him as well.

“How goes it with you, Little Barrel?” Niccolò extended his hands to grasp Sandro’s in greeting, a little too vigorously. Sandro cringed.

One of the men, worse for drink, shouted, “Hey, watch his hands! They paint the most delectable nymphs! I would that I were a painter and could invite naked women to lounge about in my *bottega* under the guise of labor. What a life you must lead!”

“You have no idea,” Sandro muttered.

Niccolò Ardinghelli, aware only of what concerned him, jumped in with a thought. “Sandro, you must paint my latest encounter with Barbary pirates! It will be a most handsome commission!”

Another compatriot chimed in, slapping Niccolò on the back. “Yes, and he will commission you to do so with the money he stole from their treasure chests once he vanquished the sea serpent, ravaged Aphrodite, and wrestled with Poseidon!”

The men burst into raucous laughter again, but Niccolò was only encouraged by the attention.

“More drink for everyone! And give the Little Barrel here a big barrel! He needs to stop being so serious!”

Sandro turned back to where the snickering Medici brothers watched his misery with no small degree of amusement. He glared at Lorenzo pointedly and rolled his eyes before returning to his task. “Niccolò, there is a friend of mine who wants to hear about your adventures in more detail.”

“Well, by all means, call him over!”

“I think he would prefer that you came to him.”

Niccolò began to protest, plumping his chest like an overfed pigeon on market day, as he turned to see whom Sandro was seated with. Upon recognition of the company, he deflated, but only slightly.

“Ah, I see. And are the Medici brothers too good to join me and my friends?”

Sandro turned to walk back to their table, delivering the clipped answer under his breath as he did so.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, they are.”



Niccolò Ardinghelli was a braggart and a show-off, but even with too much wine in his system, he was not a complete fool. He was a Florentine and recognized a summons when he was presented with one. He excused himself from his friends at the bar and approached the table where the Medici held court.

Sandro made the introductions. Lorenzo spoke first, welcoming Niccolò warmly. He clasped the man’s shoulder with his left hand as he shook the right, looking directly in Niccolò’s eyes as he spoke. It was a diplomatic trick Lorenzo had learned from Cosimo. “Connect physically with both hands when you first meet, and stay completely focused on the person you are speaking with,” his grandfather had taught. “Hold his eyes and let him know that you care about every word he says, as if he were the only person in the city that mattered at that moment. And always use his name. It is such a small thing, but this kind of connection is rare and will win the loyalty of a man in a matter of seconds.”

Lorenzo never failed to follow this advice. For Lorenzo the humanist, these actions were sincere. He did turn his full attention to the citizens he spoke with, and in those minutes they were the most important person in the city. He had learned that in doing this, he not only earned the loyalty of men but also gained great knowledge of human nature. Like a chameleon on the summer stones in the Tuscan hills, he could change his colors to match his surroundings. With refined company, the scholars and poets, he was both a scholar and a poet. With ambassadors he became a statesman, with artists he was their brother in art, and he could even outdo the worst of scoundrels if necessary by becoming as debauched as they were in the moment. The result was that men of Florence from all walks of life felt completely comfortable with Lorenzo. It was one of the reasons that, at such a young age, he was already called “the Magnificent.”

“Ardinghelli. It is a venerable name, my friend. You are practically royalty.”

“One of the oldest and greatest in Tuscany. You honor me by recognizing it.”

“The honor is mine, Niccolò. Tell me something: do you plan on leading this life of an adventurer forever? It sounds ... superb. Please, tell us more about it. I cannot wait to hear your remarkable stories.”

Sandro kicked Lorenzo under the table. Hard. Giuliano stifled a laugh by spilling his drink a little. Niccolò, delighted to have an audience, didn't notice, and Lorenzo stayed focused on his prey, smiling benevolently.

“There is no better life for a real man!”

Niccolò continued to weave his great yarns until Lorenzo, completely in control of the conversation, stopped him with another question. “How is it, friend, that with such a noble lineage, your father does not demand that you marry and carry on the family name?”

“Ach, marriage.” Niccolò made a dismissive gesture to accompany the distaste on his face. “I have no interest in it at all, and yet you are right, of course. It is our noble obligation. I shall be forced to wed eventually, there is no way around it. But I will return to Florence just long enough to get sons on my woman, and then off to the sea I shall go again!”

Lorenzo nodded thoughtfully. “But Niccolò, what if your wife was shockingly beautiful? Could not a marble-skinned goddess of love keep you in Florence if she waited in your bed? Wouldn't that be enough to keep you from the sea?”

“Never! You read too much poetry and are still young, Medici. You need

to remember this: women are sirens, luring men from their adventures. And Florentine women are the worst of all, with their ideas and their prattle. I much prefer the fast and furious tumble with a Circassian slave girl. Have you ever had one of those, Lorenzo? Black hair and blacker eyes and lips like pomegranates. Delicious and wild. And they know their place and don't annoy me with their chatter afterwards! I shall take you to Pisa when the next slave ship comes in and we can find one for you. You'll thank me for it, I promise you."

"You are too kind, Niccolò."

"Bedding beautiful women is a necessity for men like us, Lorenzo. It is our birthright. But it is a brief enough thrill and I dare say one that can be replaced. The sea, on the other hand, is eternal." His eyes began to glaze over as he set off on another rhapsody. "An unequaled adventure that no woman, even Aphrodite herself, could ever take me away from."

Lorenzo smiled at him, a sincere and bright expression. "Perfect," he said, realizing that there was no fear of Niccolò listening to him, as he was already off on a tangent about the color of the Adriatic Sea at sunset.

Lorenzo turned the smile to Giuliano and Sandro. "My God, he is absolutely perfect."



The engagement of Lucrezia Donati to Niccolò Ardinghelli was announced within a few weeks. The Donati family was pleased to find an equally esteemed and noble house to wed their daughter into. And as an engagement gift, the benevolent and generous Lorenzo de' Medici provided a highly lucrative seafaring commission to his great new friend, Niccolò, one that would take the man out of Florence for the better part of a year, immediately following his marriage.

True to his word, no woman—even the most desirable woman in Florence—would keep Niccolò from his adventure.

Lorenzo was right: it was absolutely perfect.



"He's insufferable."

"He's temporary. And necessary. Colombina, once you say your vows, it's over. He is on a ship and you are free once more."

Lucrezia Donati turned from him, moving to the window of their room in the Antica Torre. She was furious with Lorenzo for his hand in arranging her betrothal. Although the Medici were famous for brokering marriages throughout Florence, she had not expected Lorenzo to be so completely involved in her own. How could he bear to do such a thing?

“But ... how could you?”

Lorenzo joined her at the window, where they looked out over the Vallambrosan monastery, the cross of Santa Trinità shining in the sun. He placed a reassuring arm around her and explained patiently.

“How could I not? If I am forced to share you, it is my greatest desire to find the least oppressive circumstances. A husband who is absent for years at a time is a perfect solution. A God-given solution. I am grateful for it, Colombina.”

“But Lorenzo, how will I bear that one night?”

“We will get your husband raging drunk, which I dare say is not hard to do, and it will be over quickly. If we’re very successful, it may not happen at all. I did try to send Niccolò off to sea first and marry you by proxy, but he would not concede. At least he is not completely blind. The best I could do was to ship him off the following day. I’m sorry, love, but there is no way around it.”

“Then you best get me very drunk too.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “Do you not think that this kills me? I am brokering the marriage of the woman I love to another man. I would rather rip out my own teeth. It is perhaps the most heinous task I have ever carried out, but it must be done, for both of us. We should be grateful that God gave us this option, put the one man in our path who would both please your family and get out of the way, all in one package. And he is not a hunchback or a villain, merely a braggart. And some of the women envy you, I am told. They believe he is quite handsome and dashing.”

“The women of Florence do not envy me over Niccolò Ardinghelli.” Lucrezia ran a finger over his flattened nose before leaning up to kiss it. “They envy me over you.”

“Nonsense. I will never be as pretty as Niccolò, with his perfect nose.”

“Stop it. You can’t possibly be jealous of him. Besides, you are the most beautiful man in the world.”

“As long as you think so, I don’t care about anyone else.”

Lorenzo paused for a moment before asking her, with sincere curiosity,

“Does everyone know, then? About us? Really?”

Lucrezia gasped at him, incredulous. “Lorenzo, please. For such a brilliant man you sometimes miss the most obvious things. The whole city knows about us. Except perhaps for poor Niccolò!”

They both laughed at this, but Lorenzo’s mind was on to something else.

“That could be a good thing, Colombina.”

“Why?”

It was his turn to tease her. “For such a brilliant woman, you sometimes miss the most obvious things!”

He grew serious as he looked out the window again, this time pointedly in the direction of Santa Trinità.

“Because if people think you and I meet secretly only because we are lovers, they will not be looking at our more dangerous endeavors together.”

*Antica Torre, Florence
present day*

“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?” Petra Gianfigliazza, known for her cool patience, was trying not to lose her temper with the arrogant beauty who confronted her. “What is it you want, Vittoria?”

“I want Bérenger,” Vittoria replied. “I always have. He is my soul mate and I have loved him since I was a girl. You know that.”

“No, I don’t.” Petra shook her head. “I don’t believe it for a second. I have known you too long and too well. You are not in love with him. You are not in love with anything except your career and your power. That’s why Destino stopped teaching you.”

Vittoria spat at her. “I am the one who brought Bérenger to Destino’s attention, the reason he discovered his precious Poet Prince and that wretched redhead in the first place. And this is how he thanks me.”

“What is it you are really after, Vittoria? You will save us both time and trouble by being honest with me.”

“Dante is Bérenger’s son and he is a Poet Prince,” she hissed. “I want my son to have his father’s name, legitimately. He is the Second Prince, Petra. *The Second Prince*. Do you understand what that means? For all of us? For the world?”

Petra nodded, taking it all in. “I understand that you want Bérenger to marry you.”

“It is his duty as Dante’s father and as the heir to the prophecy. And I want my son to be recognized for who and what he is by Destino.”

“Why do you care about whether or not Destino recognizes him?”

“Because Dante is the true heir to the power of the Order. The artifacts should be his when Destino dies.”

The artifacts. So that was the real prize that Vittoria was after.

Petra asked the next question without even attempting to keep the incredulous tone out of her voice. “You think Destino will give *you* the Libro Rosso?”

“It belongs in the hands of the reigning Poet Prince,” Vittoria replied. “It is the law of the Order.”

Petra considered this for a moment. Vittoria may have been delusional, but she wasn’t stupid. She countered, “The law of the Order is that Destino makes the law of the Order. That said, Bérenger is the reigning Poet Prince. By your logic, he should have the Libro Rosso.”

“But Dante will be his legitimate heir. Everything should go to Dante as both Bérenger’s son and as the first child in two thousand years to fulfill the prophecy completely. Perfectly.”

“Why? Why do you want this so badly that you are willing to risk so much to attain it?”

“Why?” Vittoria was the one who was now incredulous. “Have you lost your wits, Petra? Dante will then be the highest-ranking blood prince in Europe.”

“So what? It’s the twenty-first century. There is no monarchy in Europe anymore.”

“That’s because there has been no one worthy to restore the monarchy. Don’t you see? My Dante changes all of that. We can concentrate the power of all the noble bloodline families behind Dante: Hapsburg, Buondelmonti, Sinclair. With our unified fortunes and power combined within this one perfect child, *my* child, we can rule Europe.”

Petra was stunned. She had not expected this. For hundreds of years, secret societies had been breeding grounds for half-baked plots to restore monarchy in Europe. The strategy always involved proving that some heir of one of the bloodline families represented a “lost king” who would unify Europe as a superpower. But Vittoria’s scenario, while far-fetched, had some chilling possibilities. While Dante might not ever sit on a recognized throne, he could

potentially unite billions of dollars and great power under one agenda, but what would that agenda be? And who would control it? And while she had not mentioned the messianic aspect of this master plan for her son, it was implied in her speech. Petra was chilled to the bone as she considered that Vittoria was likely not smart enough to have concocted this herself. How big was this conspiracy? How much wealth and power was behind this terrible idea?

“Vittoria ...” Trying a new tactic, Petra modulated her voice to that of mentor. “Help me understand what it is you want to do here. The Order isn’t a political organization, it is a spiritual one. Temporal power is not our agenda.”

The light of fanaticism grew in Vittoria’s eyes as she reacted. “Destroying the Church is our agenda, and we can do that if we are unified. We can return the teachings of the Libro Rosso to the light, and to Europe once and for all. We can defeat the lies that have ruled in Rome for too long. It is a blessed mission, *sister*.” Vittoria addressed Petra intentionally using the sibling definitions of the Order. “We can all make this happen together—you and me, Bérenger and Destino, and Dante. Let us bring about this new era of rebirth. The time returns. Let’s finish what Lorenzo started. *That* is the mission.”

Petra shook her head sadly. How had Vittoria become so misguided? “Destroying the Church has never been our agenda. Living in peace with other belief systems is what we aspire to, and what we have always tried to achieve. That is the Way of Love.”

Vittoria growled her frustration. “You are the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos, the leader of a dying tradition, possibly the most powerful tradition in human history. Are you going to sit back and let it die, Petra? Because I say we stand up for it and let it live. We restore the true teachings with all the power and money of Europe behind them. Bérenger and I rule together, with Dante as our heir, protecting the Order as our highest priority. If Dante is ultimately in possession of the Libro Rosso, as well as the—” Vittoria stopped herself before completing the sentence, but Petra, knowing her too well, understood.

“In possession of the Libro Rosso as well as the *what*, Vittoria? The spear?”

Vittoria was in too deep to deny anything now. She snapped. “Of course. The Spear of Destiny is the ultimate weapon of power on Earth. He who wields the true spear cannot be defeated. We need it to ensure our victory. Dante needs it.”

Petra took a deep breath and answered carefully. “The spear is not meant to be used as a weapon of war or pain ever again. To do so would be a

tremendous mistake and tragedy. Destino will never part with the authentic spear, at least not until the day he selects an heir who is worthy of its power.”

Petra’s words were falling on deaf ears. Vittoria turned to storm out of the apartment in frustration. She stopped at the door to make her final point. “Destino needs Dante. The Order needs Dante. He is that heir. You cannot deny his birth chart or what he is. The sooner you and Destino understand that, the easier this will be on everybody.”

Petra, for all her grace and diplomacy, had not become a leader in the Order through a lack of spine. She shot back, enunciating each word clearly and with authority. “Remember who I am, Vittoria, as you said it yourself. I am the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos. It is my mission and my destiny to teach the power of love and to recognize twin souls. Bérenger and Maureen are twins. They belong together. And what God has put together, let no man separate. That is the law that rules above any other.”

Vittoria slammed the door in response; Petra considered the situation as she did so. Destino had ceased to teach Vittoria because she had always been fixated on power and never on love. She was the product of a family that had lost the true meaning of the Order along the tumultuous path of history. This perverted strategy she was presenting made that clear. Fanaticism on any level was a dangerous thing.

And yet there was the question of the child. Dante Buondelmonti Sinclair was, indeed, a Poet Prince, and as such his presence and destiny could not be ignored by anyone in the Order. Whether or not he was the legendary Second Prince was still to be confirmed.

But what if he was? What then?

*Florence
spring 1469*

“SHE IS THE closest thing to royalty that exists in Rome, this girl from the Orsini family. They have the greatest number of cardinals in their line, and several popes. They are rich and influential, and will bring a prestige and influence to the Medici we have never had before.”

Lucrezia de’ Medici knew that Lorenzo would hate this discussion, as did she, but it had to happen. She had just returned from Rome, where she had gone in search of an appropriate bride for Lorenzo. That the Medici were reaching outside Florence was controversial; that they were going to Rome to find Lorenzo a wife was unheard-of.

Lucrezia, who had become a true Medici in her years of marriage, continued. “She is not beautiful, but she is not ugly either. And she is not

Florentine, so she is neither cultured nor terribly merry in her demeanor.”

“Does this get worse, Mother? Because if it does, let me go drinking with Sandro, then come back to hear the rest of it when I am appropriately numb.”

“Stop it. Think of this as Order business. That’s all it is, Lorenzo. Business. A bride from the most noble family near the papacy is the next step for you. For all of us, and for what we wish to create. The girl is a broodmare. Her purpose is to give you children with Roman blood who will help us to secure our place in the papal circle. With the help of the Orsini family, we shall get our Giuliano into the center of that circle and establish a Medici cardinal. If this Orsini girl breeds well, your sons will follow the trail Giuliano will blaze to Rome. Keep your eye on the outcome, my prince.”

Lucrezia grabbed her elder son by the shoulders and kissed him soundly on both cheeks. She did not release him as she made her point. “Understand this, Lorenzo. We are after nothing less than a Medici pope. Your own father is too ill to give you guidance and emphasize our strategy. It falls on my shoulders now as the Medici matriarch to carry out the grand plan, until you step into your grandfather’s shoes and rule Florence.

“A Medici pope, Lorenzo. Imagine it. It will give the Order access to all that is held in secret in Rome, all that has been kept from us that is rightfully ours. It may even give us the power to change the Catholic Church. And you shall be the patriarch that brings this to pass.”

Lorenzo was listening in a new way. An arranged marriage had been inevitable, so what did it matter whom he married? Anyone who was not Colombina would be abhorrent to him, so it might as well be a woman who could further the ambitions of his family and his Order.

He responded calmly. “This girl whom you and father have chosen is fine with me, Mother. Do whatever has to be done to make it official. But know this: I will not participate in a formal vow-taking ceremony with her. I will never stand before God and proclaim devotion or loyalty to any woman who is not Colombina. Marry us by proxy. Throw whatever party or spectacle you must in order to appease this Roman family and show them honor, just do not force me to take vows. Tell the Orsini that I am too busy with affairs of state to participate in a vow ceremony, particularly now that Father is so terribly ill. Of course they will understand.”

Madonna Lucrezia knew better than to push Lorenzo too far. He had accepted their choice for his bride, and that had been the objective of this discussion. She had accomplished what she needed for the further glory of the Medici dynasty.

“Of course they will understand, my son. I will make the arrangements immediately.”



Lorenzo went in search of Angelo the next morning after a long and sleepless night. Sandro was with Verrocchio this week, working hard on a number of important commissions, so Angelo was his port for this storm. He and the little poet from Montepulciano had become immediate and inseparable friends. Angelo was as sweet as he was smart, as loyal as he was shy. He was utterly devoted to Lorenzo. And in Angelo, Lorenzo had more than just a trusted new confidant; he had a writing partner, a poet of such talent and discernment that he pushed Lorenzo's own writing to new levels.

It was the second great sadness of Lorenzo's life that he did not have time to pursue his writing. He was remarkably gifted, and when his poems were entered into the highly competitive Florentine writing competitions, he always won some kind of mention. Lorenzo entered these contests under assumed names so that the organizers would not simply reward him medals because he was a Medici. He wanted to have his poetry judged on its own merits. Each time that it was, the result was the same; he was a poet of exceptional gifts.

But when Angelo Ambrogini came to Florence, there was no one who could best him for the perfect turn of phrase or most lyrical use of language. Lorenzo wasn't the least bit jealous—far from it. He had been the one to cultivate his friend's abilities and support him as he continued to write. Angelo's skills as a poet had become so renowned, so quickly, that he was now known by a new name throughout Florence. It was a tradition to honor the most gifted artists with a professional name, which consisted of their given names followed by a reference to their hometown. Thus was born the poetic name Angelo Poliziano, which meant “Angelo from Montepulciano.”

Lorenzo found Angelo in the *studiolo* he had prepared for him in the palazzo on Via Largo, working on a Greek translation.

“Angelo, I am tormented. I am to be wed to a homely Roman girl who is apparently completely without culture. What am I to do?”

Angelo smiled at him. “Use your misery in your poetry, as all great writers have in the past.”

“I tried. I was awake all night in the effort, but I cannot judge it for myself to know if it is worthy or just self-indulgent.”

“This is the beauty of the gift we have been given, Lorenzo, the purpose of

our art—to express emotion through poetry. Even if it isn't worthy and you have to throw it out, at least it served a purpose in getting you through the night. And besides, how dull would it be if the only reason we created poetry was to celebrate springtime and flowers and rainbows? All those things are lovely, but they are not art unless they have a contrast. Let this new wife from Rome provide you with some contrast. What is her name?"

Lorenzo stopped for a moment, thinking. He shook his head and replied, "I don't know. I didn't ask." Lorenzo groaned aloud. "I do not care. Angelo, I cannot write poetry about a woman because she does *not* inspire me."

Angelo was brilliant, but he was young and had never been in love. Clearly. Lorenzo continued, "I can only write about someone who does inspire me. And while thinking of this tormented mess I find myself in, I realize that it will hurt Colombina even more to know that I am getting married. So I chose to write a poem to her and about her, so that she would always know my true feelings no matter what circumstances fate put upon us. I shall read it to her to soften the blow of the terrible news. Will you look at it and tell me what you think?"

"Of course," Angelo nodded, then read Lorenzo's latest offering. He was quiet for a moment, causing Lorenzo to panic with insecurity.

"You hate it?"

"No, Lorenzo. It is stunning. Beautiful. I was just thinking that if this is how you write when you are miserable, then apparently God knew exactly what he was doing by delivering an unpleasant wife to you!"



Regarding Lorenzo's banner.

The Medici chose to produce a spectacle in honor of the marriage of Lorenzo and Clarice Orsini that would be so elaborate, so memorable, that the people of Florence would be talking about it into the next century. Lorenzo wanted nothing to do with it, of course. He was miserable over the entire idea of arranged marriage, and it was my duty as his brother to cheer him from the dark hole he threatened to fall into. We devised secret ways to incorporate our heresies into the tournament as a means of amusing ourselves.

There would be a joust and a series of games in which the young noblemen of the city would square off against each other in combat, just as in the times of chivalry. Each knight would have colors and a banner and carry the favor of one of Florence's beautiful women. In this case it was determined that there

would be an official Queen of Beauty who could sit on a throne in an elaborate gown and preside over the events as the goddess Venus herself. Of course our queen was Colombina. Who else? And no one in Florence could argue against her unparalleled beauty. Only Simonetta could compete with her, and she was still too new a presence in the city, and a foreigner at that. And she did not belong to Lorenzo.

It was given to me and the apprentices in Verrocchio's studio to create the banner that Lorenzo would carry in the joust. Thus I created the sketch from which we would work, using Colombina as our model for Venus and incorporating the dove symbol into the imagery as a nod to the name by which we all called her. Lorenzo and I both determined that we would use the Order's motto of "Le temps revient" in its French form as our ultimate act of heresy.

And so Colombina would sit on a throne, from where she would crown Lorenzo with flowers, the violets which had been symbolic of her family since ancient times, and tie the ribbons of her chosen colors to Lorenzo's armor. He would joust behind a banner painted with her image and the ancient motto of the Order, in his own way declaring that what God has put together, no man can separate. It was a daring public statement given that Colombina was now married to Niccolò Ardinghelli, so all of it was done under the auspices of the troubadours, emphasizing the notion of courtly love and the ideal of untouchable beauty.

And thus would Lorenzo de' Medici usher in his new bride from Rome.

I remain,

Alessandro di Filipepi, known as "Botticelli"

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

Florence
June 1469

CLARICE ORSINI HAD been married to Lorenzo de' Medici by proxy in Rome, where a stand-in from the Medici party had spoken Lorenzo's vows for him, carrying a document emblazoned with the Medici seal giving him permission to do so. The papers were signed and notarized by an envoy of the pope himself, and the wedding was declared legal. It was a very tidy business transaction. Clarice was then escorted from Rome to Florence with the elaborate entourage of a princess. Giuliano de' Medici was a member of the escort, and he tried very hard to calm the nervous bride and make kind conversation with her on the long ride north.

It was not easy going. Clarice Orsini de' Medici, his new sister, was not much of a conversationalist at the best of times, and at the moment she was

terrified. It didn't help that some of the Florentines in the wedding party said ribald things in praise of Lorenzo's legendary prowess, indicating the pleasures that the bride had to look forward to. Clarice was beside herself with fear and embarrassment and refused to speak for most of the journey.



The wedding reception was held in the Medici palazzo on Via Larga, and no expense had been spared. Meat had been roasting for days in preparation. There were sweets from the Orient and a hundred barrels of wine. Orange trees in terra-cotta pots, the symbol of the Medici family, were beribboned and strewn throughout the property.

The bride was brought through the main portico in her elaborate lace and damask dress, moving very slowly through the property in an effort to balance the heavily jeweled headdress that had been a gift from her parents for this occasion. Clarice may have been denied a traditional vow-taking ceremony, but the Orsini were at least determined that she would make a fine appearance on the day of her reception. The Florentines would be forced to accept that this Roman girl was every bit their equal and worthy of her place as the Medici bride and the First Lady of Florence.

Clarice stopped short with a gasp as she saw the statues that dominated the central courtyard: Donatello's *David*, in all of his glorious nakedness, stood beside Donatello's *Judith*, who was in the process of separating Holofernes from his head. They were the symbols of male and female power in an exalted form, put here by one of the world's greatest artists as commissioned by the most legendary patron.

Lucrezia de' Medici, who was escorting her new daughter-in-law into the reception, stopped, worried that the sheltered Roman girl was going to faint. "What is wrong, Clarice?"

Clarice gestured to the statues in horror. "Those ... horrible images! Why are they here on my wedding day?"

"They are always here, Clarice. They are great art, and part of the Medici collection."

Clarice shuddered and looked like she was going to cry. "They are vulgar!"

Lucrezia gathered her patience, took Clarice more firmly by the wrist, and propelled her forward into the reception. Integrating a conservative Roman girl into the glorious artistic culture of Florence just might prove to be more of a challenge than anyone had anticipated.



Clarice de' Medici was seated with a group of young, married women, as was the custom for the bride at a Florentine reception, in which the men and the women sat separately. Clarice was grateful to be sitting beside a sweet, dimpled young noblewoman who had been introduced to her as Lucrezia Ardinghelli. The woman was very beautiful, Clarice couldn't help but notice, and quite kind to her. She appeared to know a great deal about Lorenzo as they had been friends since they were children. Here was an ally to have, Clarice thought. And as this poor Lucrezia Ardinghelli was the wife of a seafaring man, she was often home alone for many months at a time. Perhaps this would be her first true friend in Florence.

Clarice dared to be optimistic about finding new friendship until the defining moment of the evening when Lorenzo approached their table and greeted all the women there. While he was unerringly polite to each of the young matrons, he never took his eyes off Lucrezia Ardinghelli, nor she him. There was a bond between them that was palpable.

Clarice Orsini de' Medici may have been young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, but she was not blind.

She had identified the enemy.



In the nuptial chamber, Clarice was dressed in her nightgown by female attendants from the wedding feast, as was customary. Lucrezia Ardinghelli was notable in her absence. The women who were present teased her good-naturedly and chattered giddily about Lorenzo's legendary masculinity, nudging Clarice and reminding her that she was the luckiest woman in Italy to be on the threshold of such an experience. While a Florentine girl would have joined in the frivolous fun, this kind of talk was nothing but scandalous to the sheltered Orsini princess. The women began to take notice that the bride was flushed to the point of fainting and reduced their commentary. They finished their ministrations quickly and left the Roman girl alone, shaking their heads as they left the Medici bridal chamber.

"What a waste of a magnificent man," one of them whispered, and the others burst into laughter in agreement. There would be much gossip about the frigid Roman bride for years to come, resulting in plenty of offers from Florentine women who were more than willing to show Lorenzo the appreciation they knew he did not receive from his wife.

Clarice was left alone, perched on the edge of the bed, rigid with dread. Here she was, married to a man whom every noble woman in Europe envied her for, and she wanted nothing more than to run away, as far and as fast as she could, back to the safety of Rome. For all that she was the daughter of one of the noblest and most storied families in Italy, she was still a sixteen-year-old girl who found herself under immense pressure while surrounded by strangers and a culture she did not comprehend. Florence was as exotic to her as Africa or the Far East. And now she would be confronted with the terrifying physical realities of this virile young man who was spoken of in such mythical terms.

By the time Lorenzo entered the chamber, Clarice was sobbing with the fear of him.

He approached her with genuine concern. The events of the evening would have been overwhelming for anyone, but he had great sympathy for her circumstances under the tremendous scrutiny of Florentine observation. It would take some getting used to for one so young and sheltered in her ways.

“Are you unwell, Clarice? Was this too much for you tonight?”

Steeling herself for what would come next, she raised her chin with some hint of her Roman pride intact as she responded. “No. I am an Orsini. I am not afraid of your Florentines. And I will do my duty to you as a Christian wife, Lorenzo. I have sworn before God to do so, to be obedient to you, and I will.”

He approached her with the same slow gentleness he would use with a fawn in the forest. He touched her hair delicately as he began to remove the pins that held it back so severely. “You have lovely hair, Clarice. I would see it down.”

Her hand flew up to stop him. “Don’t!”

He stopped, pulling his hands away from her quickly. “What is wrong?”

Her heart was beating like a trapped fox surrounded by hounds on all sides. She was trying to forestall the inevitable. “Loose hair is the sign of wanton behavior.”

“Clarice, I am your husband now. You can show yourself to me without fear.”

She recoiled when he reached out for her again, as if he had struck her.

Lorenzo inhaled deeply, finding his patience. He explained slowly, “You know, some women actually find this pleasurable. The time may come when you do as well, which is as it should be. If you can give me a chance to be a

good husband to you, our years together as man and wife will be much improved. Even enjoyable.”

Clarice straightened again, spine as stiff as steel. “My confessor says that it is a woman’s lot to suffer, first in the marital bed and then in childbirth. It is the curse of Eve.”

Lorenzo made a mental note to send her confessor back to Rome at first light. On a fast horse.

“It does not have to be so, Clarice. Let me show you.”

Her response was haughty. “Do your duty, my husband. And I will do mine. But do not expect me to enjoy it.”

Lorenzo stunned her by standing up quickly and turning to take his leave.

“Where are you going?”

“I will not take you against your will, Clarice. Wedded or no, I am a decent man. I will never force a woman under any circumstances. When you can welcome me into our marriage bed as your husband, I will return to it and do my duty as you say. I assure you, this is no more pleasant for me than it is for you. And I will not allow my own wife to turn me into a rapist. It is not in me.”

Clarice was shocked by his coarse language and terrified now that she had done something unforgivable. “You cannot leave! You will shame me, and my family.” She was screeching now. “Tomorrow they will come for the sheets, and they will see no blood on them. Your people will think I did not perform my duty to you. Or ... worse. You must stay and I ... I must do this.”

Lorenzo looked at the door longingly, and then back at the terrified virgin who sat trembling on his bed. He allowed himself a brief thought of the teachings of the Order. The Book of Love emphasized that conceiving a child where there was neither trust nor consciousness in the bridal chamber could condemn it to a difficult life. He could not allow such a curse to afflict his children. Somehow, he would need to reach this woman whom destiny had chosen for him to take to wife, for whatever reason of God’s indeterminate will.

He took a very deep breath before turning to her with patient finality. He knelt beside the bed and took her hand. “Clarice, you must trust me as a man and as your husband. I will never harm you, and I have pledged to protect you and provide for you with all my strength. I will do all of those things, and more. You are a Medici now, and you are my family. Every child we conceive will be loved and cared for with my heart and my soul. And you will be

likewise, as their mother. This is my vow to you.”

Her brown eyes were full of tears, but there was more softness in her expression than before.

“Look at me, Clarice. Tell me, if nothing else, that you will learn to trust me as your husband.” He brought his hand to her face and smiled at her, stroking her cheek with his thumb to wipe away the tears.

She attempted to smile back. “I ... trust you, my husband.” And she reached out to take his other hand in her own and squeezed it with all her strength, willing the fear to leave her body.

He approached her with great tenderness and infinite patience, careful not to hurt her or frighten her, praying all the while that this would perhaps get better as their days as man and wife stretched into the future. He knew that she would tear as he entered her, causing the bleeding that would be much analyzed on the sheets in the morning. He was as gentle as he could be, but there was no way to spare her that particular pain. Clarice winced and turned her head from him, then lay very still and kept her eyes shut tight. Lorenzo, for his sake and hers, withdrew from her quickly. He was inside her just long enough to fulfill the obligation of consummation, as he was as horrified by the circumstance as was his new wife. Before taking his leave, Lorenzo asked her, quite kindly, if she was all right. She nodded mutely, trying very hard not to sob with the indecency of what had just occurred. She could not imagine how any woman would ever find such a thing to be tolerable. Her confessor had been right. It was a woman’s lot to suffer.

Lorenzo sighed heavily, replaced his breeches, and left their chamber without looking at her again or saying another word.

Left alone in her marriage bed, the young woman who was now Clarice Orsini de’ Medici, the wife of the most magnificent man in Italy, allowed herself only one more thought before crying herself to sleep: never, at any time, did her husband try to kiss her.



Lorenzo had insisted that Colombina spend the night in the Medici palace following the wedding banquet. She had demurred, not wanting to be in the same building where he would be forced to bed another woman who was now everything that she had ever wanted to be in his life. But he had begged her, and she relented, as she always did when Lorenzo was truly insistent. It was there, to the chamber where she was installed as a guest, that he headed

immediately after the nightmare with Clarice.

He threw himself with a fierce desperation into the arms of the only woman he would ever love, nourished and reinvigorated by the answering passion he found within her.

“My Colombina,” he whispered, as he kissed her neck and lost himself in the mass of her hair. Lorenzo began to recite to her from their sacred scripture, the Song of Songs, as he whispered in her ear. He needed the respite of their tradition, the only escape he ever found from the weight of his responsibilities. His mouth trailed kisses across her collarbone between the words: “How beautiful you are, my love. How beautiful you are. Your eyes are doves.” His voice caught on the words, so lost was he in the rawness of this night.

Colombina knew, as she always did, what a toll such responsibilities took on his poet’s heart. She knew that what had transpired in his marital bed had been more difficult for Lorenzo than it was for Clarice—infinately more difficult. It would always be her own place as his beloved to allow him the freedom to release his most deeply held feelings and to escape within her. It was a role she cherished. She responded to the holy song, holding Lorenzo to her as she sang the verse that spoke of spring and of renewal in her lilting, sensual voice:

*Come then, my love,
For see, winter is past
The rains are over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth
The season of glad songs has come,
The cooing of the dove is heard
In our land.*

She stroked his hair as she whispered the last line with emphasis, and through tears, “My beloved is mine and I am his.”

Lorenzo wept openly as he caressed her in this, the only respite of trust and consciousness he would ever know. His stolen hours with her would always be bittersweet. Why God had created someone so perfect for him, and yet did not allow them to be together, was the issue that would challenge his faith and serve to torment him every day of his life.

He held her face in his hands, gazing into her eyes as he entered her.

“It is always spring when I am with you,” he whispered as they moved together in the perfect rhythm of destined lovers. “You are my only beloved,

Colombina. My only wife in the eyes of God. *Semper*. Always.”

And then the time for words was finished as lips, soft and searching, blended their shared breath in a way that matched their bodies and ultimately their souls, souls which had been joined together since before the dawn of time.



The parents of Simonetta Cattaneo would have indeed been pleased with the friends who awaited their cherished girl in Florence. Lucrezia Donati, known to her loved ones as Colombina, the Little Dove, took the beautiful, shy young girl under her protective wings. She integrated the lovely Simonetta into their community and watched with no small degree of humor as the men of the Order fell to her feet in a heap each time she entered the room.

Colombina shared with Simonetta the ways of the Order as she had learned them, the beautiful teachings of love and community that had enhanced her own life beyond any imaginings. She sat and held her friend's hand during the sacred lessons of union as they were taught by the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos, Ginevra Gianfigliazza. Such lessons of the deeper physical interactions between a man and a woman were daunting, even terrifying, for one as delicate as Simonetta Cattaneo. She was a romantic creature and gentle of spirit; she was equally delicate of body. While tall, Simonetta was extremely thin and wan, even weak. She did not eat well or often and was sometimes overtaken with fits of coughing, which required her to retire to her bed. And while she had consummated her marriage to Marco Vespucci, Colombina and Ginevra knew that this was the sole time in which there had been any kind of physical union between the couple. Simonetta simply wasn't well enough to take the chance of getting with child. Thankfully, her husband was gentle and patient, willing to try every possible doctor in Tuscany to heal Simonetta and work toward making her healthy first and foremost.

For another woman of a different character, the presence of such physical perfection as Simonetta would have been threatening, or at least irksome. But Colombina did not know or feel jealousy. In her studies with the Master, she had learned well the dangers of the Seven Patterns of Deadly Thought, and most corrosive of these was envy. Envy was an affront to God. To feel envy was to believe that you were not created perfectly as you were meant to be by your mother and father in heaven. To feel envy was to accuse God of caring for another more than yourself, which was not the nature of a loving parent. Parents were meant to love their children equally, and this was certainly true of our divine mother and father.

No, Colombina felt no envy of Simonetta's beauty or of the attention she received from men. She knew full well what it was like to be the object of intense male admiration, and it was not always an easy role to play. Beautiful women, no matter how virtuous, were often the subjects of scrutiny and gossip. Colombina had snapped at more than a few Florentine matrons whom she had overheard casting aspersions on her friend's virtue. It infuriated her that the narrow-minded—and certainly jealous—women of Florence must immediately jump to the conclusion that Simonetta was Giuliano de' Medici's mistress, simply because he paid court to her loveliness during a joust. The Medici men, indeed all men of the Order, honored the troubadour traditions of celebrating beauty. During Giuliano's *giostra*, the festival of jousting that celebrated his coming of age, Simonetta was chosen to represent the Queen of Beauty, just as Colombina had once been chosen for Lorenzo. It was symbolic, a festive and mythical throne occupied by the woman judged by the young men of Florence to be the closest embodiment of Venus.

And from the day that Simonetta was introduced to Sandro Botticelli, the rumors in Florence became more vicious.

Sandro was besotted with her. He stopped sleeping at night, so tormented was he with her physical perfection. She became his only muse, the model for every nymph and goddess he painted. He drew her face endlessly through the night, trying to capture its contours and the magical way that her hair flowed around it in a frame of shimmery golden curls. He imagined her body beneath its heavy Florentine gowns, knowing that the lithe perfection of it was more beautiful than any he had seen before. He never meant to create such scandal, but the whispers began throughout Florence that Simonetta was posing nude for Sandro. Those who were enemies of the Order poisoned these rumors further, embellishing them to create legends of orgies where Simonetta shared her body with Sandro first, then the Medici brothers later.

Colombina was disgusted by it. The rumors challenged her belief that she could act only through love: there were times when it was very difficult to love those who reviled your family. And make no mistake, the members of the Order were her family, more than any blood relations had ever been. She loved Simonetta as a sister and wanted to protect her from the acid nature of the jealous and intolerant. And yet one of the many lessons Colombina would learn in her life came to her through the beautiful girl from Genoa.

After hearing a particularly vile rumor about Simonetta in the marketplace, Colombina had taken the two spiteful Florentine girls who were its source to task publicly. She was infuriated that the sweet Simonetta was a constant source of gossip. Further, she was particularly sensitive as someone who had been victimized for years by those who whispered about her, referring to her

by the title she carried behind the closed doors of Florence, “Lorenzo’s whore.”

Simonetta heard the story, which was turning into legend across the city, and came to visit her friend and defender.

“The little dove has claws, it is said,” she joked gently with her friend.

Colombina hugged her. “I could not help myself. Those girls were so poisonous in their jealousy, so hateful in the unfair things they said about you. I could not allow it to pass.”

Simonetta’s eyes were bright, but she did not shed tears. “It disturbs me less than you think, my sister, and certainly less than it does you. I know what those women say about me—and about you. But it matters not. As the Master has taught us, it is the struggle of all elements of beauty to be recognized and protected in this world. We mustn’t allow it to hurt us or turn us to anger. Wasn’t our own blessed Magdalena called a whore by so many?”

“She still is,” Colombina replied. That Maria Magdalena, the beloved of Jesus and the apostle of the apostles, was referred to as a repentant sinner and even as a prostitute was an injustice that rankled Colombina. It was in studying Madonna Magdalena that she had first come to understand the terrible struggle that the teachings of the Way of Love had encountered over the centuries. Maria Magdalena had become dangerous to the established church in Rome in the early days of Christianity. She represented a shadow side of Christianity, a set of teachings not beholden to the political strategies or economic goals of the Roman Church. The Way of Love was pure, taught as it was from the Book of Love and its later editions of the Libro Rosso—and taught most often by women.

Colombina had a special role in the Order. She was the new scribe, committing the old prophecies of the Magdalene lineage to writing under the guidance of Fra Francesco. It was Colombina’s responsibility to ensure that the oral traditions of the Order did not die. Her current task was recording the story of the French prophetess called Jeanne, who had been executed at the stake for heresy a generation earlier. Colombina felt a special connection to the little maid from Lorraine, whom she dreamed about periodically. Sometimes Jeanne visited her in dreams and spoke to her of truth and courage, but Colombina only discussed these things with Fra Francesco and Lorenzo.

Along with Ginevra, Colombina was evolving into a very powerful and devoted force in the cause of absolute heresy in Florence.

Florence

“CLARICE DE’ Medici is pregnant—again. Can you believe it?”

Costanza Donati, Colombina’s younger sister, couldn’t wait to deliver the news. Costanza was a pretty girl but a gossip, made all the more malicious by the jealousy she felt for her more beautiful sister.

“How I envy her,” Colombina sighed. “Does she appreciate it, I wonder? That she carries his name and wakes in his arms each day, as naturally as the sun rises. That she ... bears his children.” Her throat caught at these last words, as they represented a terrible and private pain she had never expressed to anyone, and certainly not to Lorenzo.

“You don’t know that she wakes in his arms.” Costanza’s tone turned conspiratorial. “You know what they say, don’t you? His personal apothecary mixes a tincture that makes Lorenzo more potent so that when he is forced to bed his wretched wife, he impregnates her immediately. Then he can be free of her for the next ten months.”

“That is idle gossip, sister. Lorenzo is the most noble man I have ever known. He treats his wife as a queen. She is the mother of his children, and he reveres her for that.”

“Oh, of course Madonna Clarice wants for nothing,” Costanza said dramatically, before adding, “but she is colder than a slab of Carrara marble, that creature, and dull as dishwater. She is as far from you as it is possible to be, and Lorenzo worships at your altar. So to speak.”

Colombina indulged the inane giggling for a moment and then continued with her original thought. Costanza was hardly the perfect audience, but she was family and generally loyal, in spite of her petty nature. And Colombina needed to talk.

“But do you know what I am saying, ’Stanza? Clarice lives in his house and his crest is engraved in their marriage bed. What I wouldn’t give to know how that feels.”

Surprisingly, Costanza actually appeared to be listening. Her next comment was even insightful.

“Do you know what is tragic? I am certain that she envies you even more. Can you imagine what it is to have such a magnificent man for a husband and know that you will never satisfy him in any way? That his eyes are closed and he thinks of another each time he touches you? I bet he never kisses her.”

Colombina’s expression was wan. Costanza would never understand just how accurate she was, or why. Kissing was considered a great sacrament in

the *hieros-gamos* tradition, known as the sharing of the sacred breath. It was an act that blended two spirits together by combining their life force energies, and was not to be shared by anyone except one's most beloved. "No, I'm quite sure he does not kiss her."

"Well, that would be torture for any woman married to a man like Lorenzo, even one as heartless as that Roman Medea."

"She's really not so bad, you know," Lucrezia felt real sympathy for Clarice, who was, in her way, just as much a victim of circumstance as she and Lorenzo. "Clarice is quite kind beneath all that Roman coldness. And I don't think she really cares that much how Lorenzo feels or whom he beds so long as he is discreet and provides for his family. And he is expert at both those things. Lorenzo says Clarice is happiest when he leaves her alone, which suits him perfectly."

"What do you think of her being pregnant again so immediately? You must admit, il Magnifico is shockingly fertile where his *wife* is concerned." Costanza look pointedly at Colombina, who conspicuously had never become pregnant during her lengthy affair with Lorenzo. What Costanza did not know was that the same apothecary mixed an equally potent tincture for her, which she had used many times to bring about her courses and force bleeding. It was the same potion used by the high-market courtesans in Venice, who could not afford to allow pregnancy to interfere with their trade. Their clientele, ranking nobles and more than a few cardinals of the Church, paid handsomely for their ladies to remain beautiful and unmarried. Colombina tried not to fixate on this detail, on the idea that she was viewed by many in Florence as Lorenzo's personal courtesan, albeit a highly pedigreed and exquisite one. No one dared speak it for fear of the Magnificent wrath that it would invoke, but she was not a fool. Colombina knew what was said of her by those who had no love of the Medici. And yet, she allowed it little time to disrupt her. She had taken an oath to belong to Lorenzo for eternity, and nothing mattered to her more than that. Jealous and malicious Florentines be damned.

Yet on early mornings when the mist covered the Arno and Florence was peaceful before the bustle of the day began, she would take walks along the river and allow herself to weep at the injustice of it all.

Each time she bled, Colombina prayed to Maria Magdalena to forgive her for violating the laws of the Order and sobbed over the loss of a child she would give anything to bear.



Niccolò was back in Florence, home from his latest excursion. These were

always the hardest times for Colombina.

When he was away, she was the absolute mistress of her own destiny, spending most of her time with Ginevra and Simonetta, and with the Master when he was in the city, pursuing the business of the Order. And her sweetest, most secret stolen moments came about when Lorenzo was able to meet her at the Antica Torre. Here they were alone in their own world, together as the most intimate of friends and ardent of lovers. It was blissful.

But when Niccolò returned from his seafaring adventures, she was expected to be home with him as a proper wife should be. It was wretched.

On this particular night, Colombina had thought she would be safe enough keeping her meeting with Lorenzo, as Niccolò was going out to the tavern with his friends to regale them with his latest tales of pirates and lost treasure, and likely a few ribald details about slave girls and harlots in Constantinople. None of these details bothered or even interested her, so long as they meant that Niccolò wasn't around to demand her attention physically or emotionally. When he did decide he wanted to take advantage of his marital rights, he was relatively quick about it, for which Colombina was grateful, although it had given her cause to grieve for all her sisters in the world who would never know any other kind of husband, never know what it was like to have a man make love to them with all his heart and soul, as well as his body, in the way that Lorenzo did with her. So many women only knew arranged marriages to the Niccolòs of the world, who might just as well have had a hole in the bed as a flesh-and-blood wife.

She was thinking about this as she made the walk home from her all-too-brief evening with Lorenzo, about how blessed she was to have found him and how enriched her life had become through the teachings of the Order. How she wished she could share these understandings of love and equality with women who would never know anything of the kind. That was one of the objectives of the Order, and certainly Colombina's dream—to bring about a time when arranged marriages were seen as a crime committed upon women, and female children would no longer be treated as pawns in a family's game of wealth and power.

As Colombina rounded the corner to their city house, she stopped. There was a light on in Niccolò's study. Why was he home so early? She would have to think of something, quick, to explain away her absence in the night like this. She knew it was risky to see Lorenzo during the periods when Niccolò was home, but it was far more painful to be separated from her beloved for too long. She was willing to take the chance, always. She gritted her teeth and entered her house, praying he would be preoccupied with some new map or idea for a voyage.

“Where have you been so late into the night?”

Niccolò was waiting for her, and he was drunk.

“I was with the Gianfigliazza women, preparing for the Saint John’s Eve carnival. We have so much to do that I lost track of the hours passing. I’m sorry, Nico. Can I get you something? More wine? Come, have some wine with me and tell me of your evening.”

It was usually easy enough to distract him, but not this night. Something—or someone—had gotten to Niccolò Ardinghelli.

“You ... are ... a liar!” Niccolo yelled as he slapped her, hard enough to make her stumble as he continued his tirade, stalking her across the room. “Do you think I don’t know where you are? Where you go when I am not in Florence? Do you think I don’t know that you whore for the Medici every chance you get and have done so for years?”

He slapped her again. She fell to the ground this time with the force of the blow.

Colombina picked herself up, her expression reflecting a blend of dignity and contempt. She faced her husband and said with quiet strength, “I do not whore for that Medici. I give myself to him freely. I always have and I always will. Lorenzo has my heart; why shouldn’t he also possess my body?”

Her husband was incredulous. He blinked at this, trying in his drunken state to grasp the reasoning. “Because ... because you are my wife.”

“You just said I was a whore.”

“You behave as one!”

Lucrezia allowed the bitterness of her enforced years with him to flow from her lips for the first time. “Perhaps you’re right on one account. A whore beds a man because she must for her very survival. It is an act of empty rutting, done by a woman with no choice. So if I am a whore for anyone, it is for you.”

Niccolò sputtered for a moment, taken aback by a defiance he had never before seen in a woman, much less his wife. Blinded by rage, he swung, hitting her full in the face with his fist. Horrified by what he had done, he ran from the room and closed himself in his studio. Colombina picked herself up, gingerly touching the place where his fist hit the mark. Moving to the mirror that graced her entry hall, she examined her face. Niccolò’s blow would leave a welt and a deep black bruise on her cheekbone for days to come. And there was a meeting of the Order in three days’ time.



Colombina arrived three days later for the gathering of the Order at the Antica Torre. Niccolò had avoided her since the night of her beating, out of a combination of guilt, anger, and humiliation. The positive side effect of this was that she was able to attend this meeting without asking for his permission.

She had done her best to conceal Niccolò's mark on her face, rubbing it with ice and with an oil from the apothecary. While it was less vivid than before, there was still a purplish shadow, which was impossible to disguise completely. She knew that Lorenzo would notice instantly and demand an explanation. She had prepared one, not because she cared about protecting Niccolò, but because she cared about protecting Lorenzo. He had enough worries without her victimization adding to them. And she believed that her husband had felt real remorse. While he was a braggart, Niccolò wasn't inherently evil, and she was convinced that this was a singular incident and he would never hit her again. Colombina had to forgive him, as that was the Way of Love. Besides, Niccolò would be leaving again soon enough. She just needed to be patient.

Careful to enter the Torre in the presence of others so that she would not have to answer Lorenzo privately, Colombina knew that she could not avoid the issue indefinitely. As he came to kiss her in greeting, he stopped suddenly and raised one gentle index finger to run it lightly over her face. His questioning of her was deceptively gentle.

"What happened here, Colombina?"

She could not look at him and lie. Lowering her eyes, she replied, "It's nothing. A careless cleaning woman did not dry the floors properly after washing them. She left water on the marble for me to slip in. I hit the side of my face on the stairs."

Lorenzo said nothing. Instead, he used that same gentle finger to lift her chin and forced her to look at him. He held her eyes for a moment, and Colombina shuddered at what she saw in them. In all their time together, they had never truly quarreled. Their love was so strong, and so selfless, that there had never been any lie or betrayal between them. But Lorenzo's dark eyes were like burning coals as they bored into hers. He released her, gently, and walked away. For the remainder of the evening, he sat on the opposite side of the room and refused to speak with her. He was morose and contributed very little to the evening's conversation. When he did speak, it was in clipped tones and short phrases. It was clear to everyone that il Magnifico was in a difficult

mood, and the meeting was cut short with little of the usual socializing at the end.

As the gathering dispersed, Colombina looked at him across the room, her eyes full of tears. She hated seeing him like this, and hated even more that she was the cause of it. She could see his chest heave with a sigh as he walked deliberately toward her. Pulling her aside to a corner of the room, he finally spoke to her. His voice was soft, almost a whisper, incongruous with the harshness of his words.

“Lucrezia ...”

Lorenzo’s use of her given name was a more painful blow to her than anything she had endured at Niccolò’s hands. Since their days as children in the forest, he had never called her anything but Colombina, even in public. The lines were etched in his face, and he spoke slowly and with emphasis, not in his characteristically clipped tones.

“While I understand why you have lied to me, I pray that you will not do so again. There are few left alive whom I trust completely, and I do not think I could bear it if you ceased to be one of those.”

With a lover’s instinct, she reached for him. “Lorenzo, please ...”

There would be no tenderness this night, not from a man wrestling with the mighty demons that were threatening to close in on Lorenzo de’ Medici. He held up his hand, gently but firmly, to stop her from coming any closer.

“I am not finished. I have a message for your husband, and I ask that you deliver it exactly. Tell Niccolò that you were with me tonight—it is clear that he already knows that we are still together—and tell him that on this night Lorenzo took a vow before God. Tell him that I vow, if he ever strikes you again, I will kill him with my own hands.”

*Antica Torre, Florence
present day*

MAUREEN WEPT AS Destino related the story of Lorenzo and Colombina and the terrible heartache of their enforced separation. He had summoned her to Petra’s apartment to spend time with him after watching her connect so deeply with Colombina’s images in the Uffizi.

“The time returns, right?” she asked him. “Colombina and Lorenzo could not be together in any traditional way because of their circumstances. And the same is now true of Bérenger and me. Over and over again, the cycle happens. Jesus and Magdalene, Matilda and Gregory, Lorenzo and Colombina. And now Bérenger and I are not going to be able to be together as

we dreamed, just another couple separated by circumstances that they must honor. So is this my test?”

“What do you see as your test?”

“Can I be as selfless as Colombina? Can I accept that Bérenger’s destiny is to be a Poet Prince—and raise another—and that this is more important for the world than our own happiness?” She fought the tears as she continued. “But why? That’s what I want to know, Master. Why?”

Destino had heard this question many times over the centuries, a question he was never allowed to answer directly. It was not for him to give his struggling students the answers that they needed, for there was no learning in that, no permanent change to the soul. They would have to find the answers on their own and make their own choices. Over and over he had endured the pain of watching those he loved fall, and he prayed it would not happen again.

“But you see, my dear, that is precisely the point. The time returns. But it doesn’t have to. It is a choice.”

Maureen shook her head, confused. “You’ve lost me.”

Destino explained in his wise way, always careful to share the wisdom, yet equally determined not to give away the answers. “If I had to choose the one factor that caused our grand plan for the Renaissance to fail, more than any other, it was the enforced separation of Lorenzo and Colombina.”

Maureen was shocked at this. “Really? More than the politics, power, and religion?”

“Yes, because their separation was caused by all those things. If the Medici had fought to allow Lorenzo to marry for love, rather than power and alliance, the world might look very different now. Yes, the Donati opposed the union, but I believe they could have been bought. Piero was weak, and Cosimo was ill, so we did not push for the marriage as hard as we might have. We are all to blame for that failure. We did not stand up for the power of love.”

Maureen listened, fighting through the circumstances, the concepts, her own pain and frustration. “So what are you saying? That the time returns, but it shouldn’t? That it returns precisely because we keep getting it wrong?”

“I’m saying that what God has put together, no man should separate.”



The morning was bright and beautiful as Tammy and Maureen turned left at the Ponte Santa Trinità to walk along the Arno. They would cross the river at

the Ponte Vecchio, the picturesque and storied merchants' bridge, which was one of Florence's most beloved landmarks.

The women decided to take the walk across the river to visit the Chiesa di Santa Felicita, the church that the art student had told Maureen about yesterday in the Uffizi. Maureen had spent most of the night with Tammy, talking through her session with Destino and trying to make sense of it all. Béranger had called five times yesterday, but she had not spoken with him yet. Maureen needed to be very clear about the right course of action before she did so. She was still unsure of exactly what that was. A walk along the river seemed like a good way to start the day as she continued the discussion with Tammy.

"Colombina was content to be Lorenzo's mistress, to be with him in any capacity available to her no matter what. I don't know that I have the same selflessness."

Tammy replied, "Colombina didn't have to cope with the insufferable bitch who is Vittoria."

Maureen stopped and looked out to where the sun sparkled on the river, gilding the reflection of the Ponte Vecchio in the Arno.

"Nor did Colombina have to compete with the Second Coming."

"Neither do you."

"What do you mean? You don't believe in the prophecies?"

Tammy shrugged. "I do believe in the prophecies. I don't believe in Vittoria. Something is rotten in Florence, but I can't put my finger on it. It's just a hunch."

They put their conversation on hold as they approached their destination. Santa Felicita was the second-oldest church in the region, originally built in the fourth century and dedicated to a saint from Rome who was martyred in the second century. Maureen was always fascinated by stories of the women in the early Church: there was usually much to learn beneath the surface legend if you were able to dig long enough and deep enough. The case of this Saint Felicity seemed particularly tragic: she was a mother who lost all seven of her sons to Roman persecution before being executed herself. Maureen wanted to read more about her to find the details; she would put it on her agenda for further research if the church they visited today inspired her.

During the Renaissance, the Church of Santa Felicita was decorated with artworks from greats like Neri di Bicci, and *The Deposition of the Cross* by Pontormo was considered one of the most significant works of the early

Mannerist style. It was amazing to Maureen that so many of the most important artworks in Italy were readily available to view in the churches that dotted the city every few hundred yards. Each church she entered was a like a miniature world-class museum.

Santa Felicita was no exception. The Pontormo artwork covered the chapel designed by the great Brunelleschi, the genius responsible for the majestic and unequalled Duomo. Surrounding the window, a fresco, also by Pontormo, depicted the popular annunciation scene, with a beautiful and welcoming Mary receiving her joyous news from the angel Gabriel. But the standout was the fresco that covered the entire wall, encapsulating the moment when Christ's body was removed from the cross. Pontormo's version was indeed unique; the colors were bright and vibrant, women draped in deep blues and vibrant pinks. In the early Mannerist style, they were long-limbed and graceful, and the characters appeared to merge into each other in a strangely lyrical dance of mourning. Mary Magdalene, veiled in pink, held Jesus at his head and shoulders, supported by other characters less easily identified, while his mother swooned with her grief. Saint Veronica was present, back to the viewer, and appeared to be reaching out to the blessed mother with one hand, and holding the veil of her legend in the other.

It was a beautiful and worthy piece of art, and yet after spending a day in the presence of Botticelli, Maureen and Tammy were not as inspired by it as they might have been on another day. They explored the church a bit, walking along the nave and admiring the rest of the art and architecture that graced the building. Tammy, walking ahead of Maureen, now stopped in front of an enormous painting on the right wall. She had a look of utter horror on her face.

"What is it?" Maureen asked, as she approached her friend and the painting.

"Maureen, meet Saint Felicity."

The painting was majestic, tragic, and horrifying. Felicity rose like a phoenix from the bodies of her dead sons, which lay scattered around her in various poses of death. They were bloody and twisted; some were decapitated. Felicity herself stood in the midst of it all, arms outstretched to heaven. Her pose was one of defiance rather than grief. Over her knee was the body of her youngest son, a beautiful golden-haired boy who was limp and lifeless.

Maureen was nauseated by the painting. Tammy was horrified. But neither of them could turn their eyes away from it.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" They both jumped at the English accent, which came

from behind them, and turned to see the art student from the Uffizi. Maureen noticed that she was still wearing the leather gloves, despite the hot weather. The girl looked down at her hands self-consciously for a moment and said by way of explanation, simply, “Eczema.” She then continued, explaining her appearance. “I work here as a volunteer, for the Confraternity of the Holy Apparition. The Florentine chapter meets here. Felicity is one of our patronesses. Although she wasn’t a visionary as such, she heard the voice of God clearly enough to sacrifice her children for him. Do you know her story?”

“Other than the fact that her seven sons were slain before her, no. I don’t know the rest.”

Felicity launched into the story of Santa Felicita, providing the details of how the saint encouraged the deaths of her children, even cheered them on. She concluded by reciting the quote from Saint Augustine:

Wonderful is the sight set before the eyes of our faith, a mother choosing for her children to finish their earthly lives before her contrary to all our human instincts.

Tammy could take no more. She wasn’t skilled at holding her tongue at the best of times, but as she stood there with the new life of a beloved child growing within her womb, everything within her spirit rebelled. Unconsciously, her hand moved to cover her belly, as if to shield it from the horror of Felicity’s story.

“Sorry, but everything about that is wrong in so many ways that I wouldn’t even know where to begin. No sane woman allows suffering or death to come to her child. No mother watches while her son is murdered before her, if she has the power to stop it. Nor do I believe that this is what God would want from any of us.”

Felicity narrowed her eyes as she looked away from the painting and then at Tammy. “You believe you know what God wants?” she asked softly.

“I believe that God does not want us to allow death or injury to come to our children, and he entrusts us to become mothers and protectors of the innocent. I do not believe that God wants a blood sacrifice of innocents. Ever.”

Felicity refused to look at Tammy or Maureen and fixated again on the horrific sight of Felicita draped in the corpses of her babies. When she spoke it was in a strange cadence, a mantra repeated by rote.

She did not send her sons away, she sent them on to God. She understood that they were beginning life, not ending it. It was not

enough that she looked on but that she encouraged them. She bore more fruit with her courage than with her womb. Seeing them be strong, she was strong, and in the victory of each of her children, she was victorious.

Tammy appeared outraged and Maureen was speechless. Was this young, twenty-first-century woman saying that she thought this was not only acceptable but exalted behavior? It was unconscionable.

Before either of them could speak again, Felicity turned to take her leave. She said over her shoulder, “We are having an event here in honor of one of Florence’s greatest heroes later this week, on the twenty-third of May. It is the anniversary of the death of the holy brother Girolamo Savonarola, and it promises to be quite an event. There are fliers at the front of the church if you are interested in more information. Enjoy your stay.”

Tammy leaned against one of the pews, both hands holding her belly now, as Felicity walked away, disappearing somewhere into a gated area of the church that was not open to the public. She exhaled deeply and said to Maureen, “I think I am going to throw up.”

Maureen nodded. The encounter had been very disturbing for both of them. “This”—she pointed to the painting of Felicita surrounded by the massacred innocents—“is everything that is wrong with religious fanaticism. This is the example of how the teachings of the Way of Love were abused and corrupted. This, my friend, is the enemy.”

They were walking toward the front of the church now, both anxious to get out of there and into the healing rays of the Florentine sun. Tammy stopped at a little table near the holy water font, where church bulletins were scattered alongside a stack of fliers for the event Felicity had mentioned. Tammy picked one up and gasped.

“No, my friend,” she said to Maureen. “I believe *that* was the enemy.” Tammy gestured to where Felicity had disappeared before handing Maureen the offending flier. Beneath the details of the commemoration in honor of the martyrdom of the holy brother Savonarola was a photograph of Maureen’s latest book, *The Time Returns*, along with the bold command to “Stop the Blasphemy!”

Florence
1475

THE TAVERN IN Ognissanti was calmer than usual this night. The weather was glorious, the kind of Florentine evening in which the air caresses the skin like a silk coverlet. For Tuscans, it was criminal to be indoors on such a perfect

night. And yet for Lorenzo, these opportunities for unbridled relaxation with Sandro were sacred, stolen moments. And Sandro was in fine form, having come from an eventful day in the studio with Andrea del Verrocchio and his brother artists.

Sandro Botticelli was caught up in a magnificent creative spiral: the more he painted, the more he wanted to. He was devoted completely to his mission as an artist. For all his cynicism, Sandro was a man of deep and abiding faith. He thanked God every day, and often many times a day, for the talent he had been given and for the means with which to express it. He also thanked God for Lorenzo and the Medici family and prayed for their safety so that the mission of combining art and faith would endure.

Verrocchio's studio was the training ground for the angelics, and Sandro operated as the eyes and ears of the Medici from within it. He reported to Lorenzo regularly on the progress of the members, some established well within the Order, others still being tested for their mettle.

"Domenico is clearly the most gifted. Aside from me, of course," Sandro began. He was many things; humble was not one of them. Yet he did not exaggerate his talents. He was unequalled anywhere in Florence now in terms of technique and output. No one could dispute that. But as a result, Lorenzo knew that he could trust every word that Sandro uttered about the other artists they were grooming for the Order.

They were discussing the work of Domenico Ghirlandaio, a darkly handsome, soft-spoken family man from an accomplished Florentine art dynasty.

"His fresco technique is unmatched. The frescoes he is working on for your mother's family at Santa Maria Maggiore are stunning. You must get over there to see them in these early stages, for to watch him while he is working is very inspiring. And he has the face and bearing of an angel himself, which adds to the pleasure of observing him as he creates. I would use him as a model if he wasn't already so inclined to paint himself. He is a bit of a peacock. A quiet peacock, but one who struts all the same. That said, he's not insufferable like that strange bird from Vinci."

"Leonardo?"

Sandro nodded and signaled the serving girl to bring more ale. "Mm-hm. Leonardo. I'm not sure about him, Lorenzo, even though his sketches are remarkable and he has a technical precision that is something special to observe. I haven't quite figured out how to describe him. He's ... off. He is not one of us."

“You don’t think he has angelic talent?”

“I don’t think he has angelic temperament.”

“Neither do you, most of the time.”

“Ha. Very funny. And it’s a good thing you’re buying the ale or I wouldn’t put up with you. Leonardo is different from the others, different from me, to be sure. He is a loner. That in itself isn’t a crime. Donatello was a madman as well as a loner, and yet he was still angelic. The difference becomes apparent when you watch them create. When Donatello stood before a piece of wood or stone, you could see the divinity pouring through him as he made that initial contact with the source of his art. Fra Lippi is the same, as you well know. God works through him when he paints, so tangibly that you can almost see it pouring from his fingers. But most of all, I know how it feels myself. It is something that engages the heart and spirit in combination with the mind, before flowing into the hands.”

“And Leonardo doesn’t do that?”

“He can’t. I watch him, and he works only from the neck up. He also has a very high opinion of himself and listens to nobody.”

Lorenzo was slightly irked that Sandro might be brushing aside Leonardo’s talent too readily because of personality conflicts—or jealousy. He responded, “Andrea says that Leonardo creates the most technically perfect sketches he has ever seen. We need that kind of talent, Sandro. We must work with him. The Master needs that kind of talent for what we are creating.”

Sandro snapped at his friend, “*I* can and will create whatever Fra Francesco needs. He does not require the services of someone who has no reverence for our Lord.”

“What does that mean?”

“I told you. Leonardo is not one of us. He cannot engage his heart when he is given tasks that involve our Lord or our Lady. He’s from Baptist country, Lorenzo. The extreme side. He believes that John was always the true messiah.”

“He did not say so when we interviewed him to come into our studio.”

“I said he is odd, but he is not a fool. He knows that there is more opportunity here for him than anywhere else in Italy, and he also knew that he would never be admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke if he did not please you.”

The Guild of Saint Luke was the artist’s enclave responsible for overseeing all the great painting commissions in Florence. To truly make a

name for oneself, and a good living as an artist, one had to be a member of the Guild. And given that it had ties to the Order and the Medici, being within the good graces of both was necessary for membership.

“But it will have to end somewhere, I’m telling you. He may be brilliant, but he is not one to produce quickly or proficiently when the subject matter isn’t to his liking. He has been working on a Magi sketch for months. And while he continues to add figures to it, it is going nowhere. I would bet every florin I have ever made that it will never see paint. Such genius is of no use to us, Lorenzo, if it cannot be channeled to our purposes. I can paint ten times what he sketches in a month.”

Lorenzo nodded. Sandro was full of his own abilities, but he had every right to be. He was not only a creative genius, and one who truly understood the teachings of the Order, but he was also unequaled in his productivity. He was prolific beyond any other artist Lorenzo had ever seen. And this was a tenet of the Order: to create for God, as often as possible, and with as much passion and commitment as could be channeled into the art. Angelic artists were not only gifted in terms of quality, they were able to produce in quantity without sacrificing the art.

“Leonardo is not a producer. While the rest of us pour out frescoes and major works, he is still drawing bizarre machines on his sketchpad—gigantic tools for excavating dirt, or weapons of war to chop a man to bits. Perhaps those are useful and even interesting, but they do not serve our mission. Further, he has no interest in the teachings of the Order and isn’t hearing Andrea when he conveys certain secrets.”

Sandro had Lorenzo’s full attention now, as he knew he would. That Leonardo wasn’t connecting with the teachings of the Order, and was perhaps even in opposition to the true teachings, was important. The purpose of cultivating these artists was not merely for art’s sake; it was to create a stable of divinely gifted scribes who could translate the sacred teachings into masterworks for the future.

“Do you think he is dangerous? Or a spy?”

Sandro shook his head. “I don’t see guile in him, necessarily. But that doesn’t mean he can’t be used by those who have plenty to spare. I simply don’t think he has the capacity to be loyal to you or to the Order. We are not his priority, nor do I think we can ever be.”

Lorenzo considered this and added, “Jacopo tells me that Leonardo is the greatest artist who has ever lived.”

“Bracciolini said that?” Sandro did not attempt to hide his disdain. “He would. They are similar types. Cerebral. Mental geniuses who are completely cut off from anything higher than what is in their own heads.”

“So you do not think that Leonardo should be moved to the next level, just to see how he fares?” Lorenzo asked. “I was going to send him to a private meeting with the Master for evaluation.”

Sandro shrugged. “It wouldn’t hurt to see what Fra Francesco has to say about him. He is the greatest judge of character on God’s earth. But I would not hold out great hope for this Leonardo. Did I mention that he writes backwards? As if in a mirror? While it is an interesting feat, what is the point of such an endeavor other than a parlor trick? I would like to see what would happen if he put that mind of his into something more diverse.”

Lorenzo nodded, taking it all in. He was disturbed by this report. Leonardo da Vinci was a rare talent, an extraordinary genius. Lorenzo had great hopes of bringing him into the fold. And on the occasions when they met, he always found Leonardo to be elegant and polite, a well-spoken young man with extraordinary intelligence and insights. To learn of these unexpected challenges was troubling. He would need to discuss them with Andrea as well as Fra Francesco.

“Oh, and there’s one more thing I haven’t told you. He hates women.”

“What do you mean, he hates women?”

“Despises the female sex. Can’t stand the sight of them. Told me he thinks they are all deceitful whores and tricksters. He speaks as a man who was abandoned in the cradle, and perhaps he was. He has not known maternal love, which is clear when you see that he is incapable of drawing a Madonna who is connected to her child. He has no understanding of the mother-and-child bond. And he won’t stay in the room if the model is female. So I do not think he is going to be overjoyed with the teachings of the Order once he is further immersed into the requisite devotion to our Lady.

“So while you might get a few decent John the Baptist paintings out of him, I’m thinking that he may not be the best portrait artist for our beloved Madonnas.”



There was an air about Leonardo da Vinci, a controlled yet tangible energy that radiated from the young man. Lorenzo, after spending several hours with him in the studio, had no doubt that Leonardo was an angelic. His talent was

staggering. To look through his sketches was to be stunned by the exquisite precision with which he worked. And like the others who had been identified by Lorenzo and his grandfather before him, Leonardo had a certain charisma that was found in all the divinely gifted artists. On the surface, there was nothing about this man that should not be exciting and promising to all who valued artistic talent. And he was unerringly polite to both Lorenzo and the Master. While Sandro and the other artists had complained that Leonardo's temperament was often one of well-displayed hubris, Lorenzo did not witness this himself.

"You honor me, Magnifico," Leonardo said in a warm voice with a southern Tuscan inflection. "I wish to create in a way that is pleasing to you."

Lorenzo thanked Leonardo as they worked through his sketches. The infamous *Adoration of the Magi* sketch, which Sandro had complained about, was the focus of their discussion. It was indeed a very busy sketch, but also a grand one. The scope was magnificent, and there was an elaborate narrative woven through the work. It was beautiful and powerful, and yet as Lorenzo examined it, he was beginning to understand what Sandro meant when he said it would always be incomplete.

"You do not like it, Magnifico?"

Leonardo da Vinci was genuinely concerned. Again, Lorenzo was not witnessing the grand pride that the other artists accused him of, nor did Leonardo appear to be playing the innocent for his patron. And yet there was something happening here with this artist that Lorenzo had not experienced with any of his other angelics. With the other artists, even the extremely temperamental ones, there was an ease of communication. It amounted to a sheer passion for art and the process of transmitting the divine into the work that they all shared and all celebrated. That passion could not be seen in Leonardo, for all his extraordinary talent.

Lorenzo stared at the *Adoration of the Magi*, willing his mind and spirit to work together to help him to identify exactly what was missing in the sketch. As Sandro had pointed out, there was no feeling of relationship between the Madonna and her child. But there was something else here that was disturbing, and Lorenzo was trying to grasp it. Leonardo was waiting for him to reply, and it was cruel to leave an artist to believe his work was not appreciated.

"Actually, Leonardo, I like it very much. What you have created here—this background with the staircase, the horses here and how they help create perspective, the use of the kings spaced across the foreground on either side—

it is stunning. Truly magnificent. It's just ..." Lorenzo ran his finger along the edges of the paper as he considered, then jumped when he cut himself on the corner, drawing blood. He sucked on the offended finger for a moment to stop the bleeding, and as he did so, the realization came to him.

"It's just that ... all of these figures appear to be *afraid*. Here is a scene of the most sacred event in human history, the birth of our Lord, the prince who will show us the most divine love. And yet you have given all those in attendance of the holy event an expression of fear."

Leonardo was quiet for a long moment before responding. "I do not see it as fear. I see it as awe."

Lorenzo considered this for a moment before responding. "Awe? Really? But look at this figure here, the king who is Balthazar," Lorenzo pointed out, animated with both the realization and the challenge now. "He is cowering from the infant Jesus. Clearly, that is fear rather than awe. And this figure above the holy child. He appears to be recoiling, almost as if in horror. I'm afraid, my friend, I do not get the sense that this is a *celebration* of our Lord's birth."

Leonardo shrugged, his mouth twitching a bit, as he let his careful guard down for the first time. Perhaps it was Lorenzo's honest assessment of the work that allowed him to slip, but slip he did. When he replied, Leonardo's voice was soft but sure, although he could not look Lorenzo in the eyes as he spoke.

"Perhaps not everyone believes that the birth of Jesus was something to be celebrated. Perhaps for some it was an event to be feared, or even despised. If art is meant to be truth, then I would paint it as such."

Lorenzo was taken aback by the harshly heretical statement. He glanced up at Fra Francesco, who was utterly silent, an observer of what he sensed to be a grand drama playing out quietly before him in the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio.

"You do not believe that the birth of Jesus is an event to be celebrated, Leonardo?" Lorenzo kept his voice calm and casual. He wanted a true answer, and not a reaction.

"It does not matter what I believe, Magnifico. If you are my patron, and you want figures who are smiling at the birth of Jesus, then it is my job to please you. I can assure you that when these images are translated into paint, I shall adjust the facial expressions to provide you with whatever it is that you require."

It was a careful answer, and a brilliant one. Leonardo did not answer the

question of what he did or did not believe. He avoided it completely, giving the correct reply to please a patron.

Lorenzo smiled and thanked him, assuring Leonardo again that he was an artist of consummate skill and that he, Lorenzo, would look forward to seeing what he produced in the future. He then called for Andrea to meet with him and the Master later that afternoon back in the Via Larga for dinner to discuss what was now being called the Leonardo problem.



Andrea del Verrocchio had been unerringly loyal to three generations of Medici, but he was not going to lose the greatest sketch artist he had ever trained without a fight.

“Leonardo’s is a rare talent, Lorenzo. He is a genius.”

“I’m aware of that. I have eyes, Andrea. I also have ears. Did you hear what he said about the birth of our Lord being an event to be feared and despised? He may be a genius, but unfortunately, he is not *our* genius.”

“Give me more time with him. We work well together. Perhaps he can be brought around ...”

“You cannot make a man what he is not.” Lorenzo smiled wanly at the man whom he loved and trusted so completely. “Even you, my friend, as brilliant a teacher as you are, cannot transform a man who does not want to be thus changed. No man ever achieved true greatness using just his mind. One must also engage the heart. I do not think Leonardo will do that, because he does not desire to.”

Andrea looked at Fra Francesco, who had taught them both the meaning of love as it had been brought to them all through the teachings of Jesus Christ. “And what do you think, Master?”

Fra Francesco answered carefully. “What do I think? Or what do I feel? Because that is what this comes down to, isn’t it? Leonardo knows how to think, but he does not know how to feel, and he chooses to stay in that place of isolation. I do not think anyone will draw him away from that choice, as he holds it too close. There is great darkness in that heart, a darkness that comes from sadness. It is not of his own making or of his own doing, but it is there all the same.”

“Do you think he is an angelic?” This was Lorenzo’s question.

“Undoubtedly,” the Master answered, startling both men with his certainty.

Never before had any artist, no matter how difficult, been dismissed if it was determined that he was born with the angelic gifts. Would Fra Francesco insist on keeping him, then?

“But I think he is an angel who has been damaged by his human experiences, and this happened at a very young age. It would take great love to crack him open and release the pure divinity that is trapped within his spirit. I do not foresee that happening. However, we are taught through the greatest of prayers that forgiveness must be for all men, and we must therefore allow Leonardo to continue awhile longer under Andrea’s tutelage. We will treat him with love, tolerance, and forgiveness, as our Lord has taught us through his commandments, and see if that brings about a change in him.”

“And if it does not?” Lorenzo asked.

“If it does not,” Fra Francesco said with a little smile, “then we find him a new patron, elsewhere in Italy, some noble family whose favor you wish to secure who will celebrate the name of the Medici for selflessly surrendering their most talented young artist as an act of friendship.”

Lorenzo raised his glass to the ancient man with the scarred face. Now *that* was genius.



The year 1475 was turning out to be an important one for Lorenzo, one in which the blessings of God were being showered on all of Tuscany through the arrival of several children, deemed to have potentially angelic gifts, based on their parentage combined with the position of the stars at their time of birth. The astrological and numerological predictions of the Magi had foretold that this would be an exalted year. Indeed, Clarice was expecting again, due in December, and the Magi were predicting a son with a destiny to carry the mission of the Order into the future. Lorenzo had great hopes for this expected child, as his elder son, little Piero, was already showing signs of being a product of his mother. He was sullen and spoiled, and Lorenzo argued with Clarice regularly about the boy’s pending education. He was still too young for these battles to matter overmuch, but in the next few years Lorenzo would have to be firm in guiding the direction of Piero’s education. Clarice wanted him schooled from the Psalter, learning to read and write only from the sanctified teachings of the Church. Lorenzo, of course, wanted him immediately immersed in the classics.

Lorenzo’s greatest joy as a parent came from his daughters. The elder, named after his mother, Lucrezia, was a sweet girl who loved to sing for her father. But his baby, the joy of his life, was little Maria Maddalena. Madi was

precocious and playful and had her father wrapped around her pudgy little finger. The first thing Lorenzo did when he entered the palazzo after a day away was scoop her up and toss her about until she squealed with delight. Maddalena was special, not just for her sunny, feisty personality—she was born under the star sign of Leo, on the twenty-fifth of July—but because she had healed Lorenzo’s broken heart after the loss of the twins. In the previous year, Clarice had given birth to twin boys, but they were tiny and weak and did not survive longer than a few days. He was shattered by the loss, as was Clarice. But the arrival of Maddalena restored him. Strangely, Clarice had the opposite reaction and seemed less inclined to favor Maddalena than she was the other children. This caused Lorenzo to pamper his Madi even further.

Still, the Medici dynasty required boys to continue with their grand plan, particularly one whom they could devote to the Church. Piero was not shaping up to have the personality, temperament, or intelligence of his father. He was young enough to change, perhaps, but he was Clarice’s child so completely that such a thing seemed unlikely. What Lorenzo needed was a son with Maddalena’s intelligence and temperament. He prayed daily for the safe delivery of this new son. And he prayed for the other baby.

Colombina was also expecting.

They no longer bothered with the charade where Niccolò was concerned, but for the rest of Florence and for the sake of this baby’s name and future, it had been necessary to ensure that Niccolò Ardinghelli was in Florence long enough to appear to have impregnated his own wife. Then Lorenzo shipped him off again. He had an agreement with Niccolò now, which was very lucrative for the Ardinghelli family. As a result, Niccolò maintained the appearance that he and Colombina were man and wife and did exactly as Lorenzo bid in public. Most of all, Lorenzo insisted that Colombina have absolute freedom to live any way she pleased.

Still, it was widely rumored in Florence that the Ardinghelli marriage was a sham. Supporters of the Medici defended it, but their detractors were quick to gossip and point out the various pieces of evidence that indicated that Lorenzo and Madonna Ardinghelli were engaged in adultery and had been for years. Sandro was nearly imprisoned for breaking the nose of one of these loose-lipped men, an old drinking partner from Niccolò’s bachelor days, in the Tavern at Ognissanti. The lout had shouted in response to the news that Colombina was expecting, “The Medici balls really are everywhere in Florence—but particularly in Lucrezia Ardinghelli!”

The loudmouth had it coming, Sandro said simply in his own defense. Besides, it was a great risk to the hands of any painter to punch someone that hard. Sandro had suffered enough for the offense. The judge, from a long line

of Medici supporters, agreed and let Sandro go with no penalty and chastised the plaintiff for attempting to sully the good name of Madonna Ardinghelli. The judge was later given a lovely portrait of his wife by the grateful Sandro.

Lorenzo's commitment to his one true love never wavered, and it was devastating for him that he could not be with her during her pregnancy. Colombina, heavy with his child, was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Lorenzo sent Sandro over to sketch her, as he wanted her captured in this ripe beauty, looking like Venus incarnate. The drawings Sandro returned with were stunning, and Lorenzo and Sandro pored over them for hours, trying to determine precisely how they would want to include them in a painting that would grace Lorenzo's private studio.

But the abundance of blessed children was not limited to Florence alone. The Magi had been giddy with their predictions for a child who was due to the Buonarroti family in Southern Tuscany. The Buonarroti, the descendants of the great Matilda of Tuscany, were watched closely by the Order, as their children were often highly gifted in some way. There was a Buonarroti among the Magi, and it was in fact this same astrologer who cast the birth chart of the baby boy who entered the world on March 6, 1475, near Arezzo. The horoscope of this infant was so exalted that the Magi recommended he be given a special name to identify him as an angelic from the moment of his arrival. Thus the baby had been called by the unusual name that evoked the Archangel Michael.

Michelangelo.

It would be interesting to keep an eye on this boy, and Lorenzo and the Order had compensated the Buonarroti family handsomely to secure their move north to Florence, where he could be educated and observed. Lorenzo was excited about the prospects. Surely a boy named for the greatest of the archangels had extraordinary promise for the future Order.



Le temps revient.

For years, Lorenzo and I had been discussing the merits of creating an ultimate work of art that would encapsulate all the teachings we held so dear, one which

we would entitle *The Time Returns*. It would need to be large enough to capture all the concepts that we laid out, and thus he ultimately commissioned a mural that would cover the majority of the wall of his private studiolo.

It was the pregnancy of Colombina that inspired this painting. She was unspeakably beautiful in her fullness, the essence of the mother goddess in flower. When I sketched her, I wept with the beauty that was so evident in this state of impending motherhood. Thus I placed Colombina, as the female aspect of God, in the center of the work. Call her what you will, and it matters not. She is Venus, she is Asherah, she is our mother who guides and nurtures us by any name. She is Divine Beauty. I have cloaked her in the red of Our Lady Magdalena, which is embroidered with the diamonds of divine union, and she is wearing the sandals referenced in the Song of Songs: “How beautiful are your feet in sandals, my love,” says the sacred bridegroom to his eternal bride.

Our Lady presides over the cycle of souls as they experience the beauty of human love here before ascending to the love of God and then returning back to earth as it all begins again. Her garden is lush and magical, filled with the symbols of the Medici family and the flowers and plants that grow around the gardens we all love so much in Careggi. She blesses us with her right hand, and yet also signals that we move our attention to the dance of the three Graces. This is the dance of life, a celebration of earthly love in its three guises: purity, beauty, and pleasure. Purity, or chastity, does not and should not remain once true love has come into the mix, and thus the figure of Cupid hovers above the scene, with his bow aimed squarely at Chastity. Soon she will become Beauty and then Pleasure as she moves through the threefold cycle of love.

Of course I have used the sketches I made of Ginevra, Simonetta, and Colombina, on the night they all danced together like this in the Antica Torre.

Another sketch I have used for this family portrait of sorts was the one I made of our Angelo, on the day he arrived in Careggi, depicting him as Hermes, stirring things up for all of us. I used this idea of Angelo but combined it with the face and figure of Giuliano de’ Medici, who is the more beautiful model for a god. Here, Mercury/Hermes is stirring the weather, but

he is also acting as the conduit between heaven and earth. He is the embodiment of his own teachings within the Emerald Tablet: that which is above is also below, as we all come together to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing.

And what is that One Thing? It is creating heaven on earth through the utter appreciation of Beauty in all its forms, through the veil of love. This is the Way.

To the right of the painting I continued to pay tribute to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes with the image of the wind, Zephyr. “The wind carries it in his belly” is an allegory for the miracle of life, returning the soul to earth. Here Zephyr is giving birth to Chloris, who was his true beloved. According to the Greek masters, Zephyr and Chloris were souls twinned by God to rule over the weather together, and thus I used them to illustrate this concept of one twin giving birth to the other, which is the essence of what occurs when true beloveds are reunited. They are reborn. As Chloris, she is making the transition from the heavenly realms to the earthly realms. She ultimately incarnates as Flora, showing the full cycle of incarnation as she steps in to her role as the fully realized human woman. Flora is anthropos, she is humanitas, she is all that is beautiful about flesh-and-blood mankind. The flowers in her apron are held over her womb to indicate fertility, for she is lush with life. She throws the blooms about, scattering joy through the understanding and celebration of Beauty in its most exalted form.

Simonetta, of course, was my model for Flora, her delicate beauty inspiring me as it always does. I have taken artistic license in her figure, making her full and vibrant with health while hoping that somehow my painting will create the alchemy of healing magic and turn our Bella into the same image of radiance. But alas, she had to return to her bed after a few short hours with me. Her strength is yet to return, but our hope for her is as eternal as the spring in the painting.

And so it was that I completed the masterwork of my life, the one into which I poured my heart and soul; it depicted the people I loved most enacting the teachings I revere. Lorenzo was overjoyed with it, more than I have ever seen him with any other piece of art. He had it installed in his studiolo immediately and told me that nothing, other than Colombina herself, has ever brought him such an understanding of the nature of Beauty.

I remain,
Alessandro di Filipepi, known as “Botticelli”

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

Florence

present day

“WHAT IS GENIUS?” The Master posed the question to all of them as they drank Chianti on the roof terrace. “Was Leonardo a genius simply because he was technically proficient over and above other artists? Does that make him a genius? Certainly, he had a mental capacity that has rarely been seen among men in any time in history. So perhaps that is enough to be called such?”

Having been through the Botticelli-versus-Leonardo challenge in the Uffizi earlier in the week, no one in this company was going to speak up for Leonardo as a genius. Petra added to the lesson, “No man ever achieved greatness using just his mind. One must also engage the heart.”

“True, of course. Leonardo’s output was sporadic and incomplete. He was incapable of finishing most of what he started, and yet no one ever talks about that aspect of his character. Does a genius or a great man abandon the majority of his projects long before completion? I do not think so. Leonardo could not produce to the levels of Ghirlandaio and Botticelli, not even a fraction. And yet he is given more credit for genius than the two of them put together and multiplied, as the greatest mind of the Renaissance. It is one of history’s most notable injustices.”

“What happened between Leonardo and Lorenzo?” Maureen asked.

Destino continued the tale. “Lorenzo kept his promises as he always did, in this case both to me and to Leonardo, by allowing him to stay in Florence for a number of years. This was in spite of the fact that he was never really productive for the Medici and created nothing that we would ever be able to use within the Order. Ultimately he was extremely disloyal to Lorenzo, although Lorenzo was never disloyal to him. In fact, Leonardo had great reason to love the Medici, although he never found it in his heart to do so.

“It became clear that Leonardo was no longer benign. Even Andrea, who defended him for years, could no longer tolerate the vitriol he was emitting on a more regular basis. He lasted a long time, but in 1482 it became necessary to get him out of Florence once and for all. We sent him to Milan, as a gift to the powerful Sforza family. They were solidified as allies for the duration of Lorenzo’s life as a result of this most generous gift of his greatest artist to Milan!”

“And the story ends there?” Peter asked.

Destino’s eyes became cloudy with the disturbing aspect of this memory. “I’m afraid it does not. We discovered, years later and far too late, that Leonardo had been a true enemy in our midst. He was spying for Rome,

leaking secrets of the Order to the Vatican. What his motivation was, I will never know for sure. Whether he did it for money, for spite, or for some twisted idea of religious conviction, intending to bring about the downfall of our Order, I do not know to this day. Perhaps Leonardo's greatest genius was that he remains a tremendous enigma.

"Leonardo da Vinci is a great lesson for all of us. For years I did penance for the night in which I insisted that Lorenzo keep him. Had we sent him away when he was first identified as a danger to us, perhaps the terrible thing that happened next would not have happened at all. Perhaps that villain Sixtus would not have had the ammunition he needed to attack the Medici as he did. What I felt was forgiveness turned out to be lack of judgment. And this is the lesson, my children. You must always forgive, and treat others with love. But this does not mean that you need to keep a snarling wolf among the lambs.

"For Leonardo, while treacherous, was not the ultimate traitor. There was one far greater and far more dangerous in our midst."

Florence
December 1475

CLARICE COULD NOT locate Madonna Lucrezia and was in a panic. She had given birth enough times to know that this baby would be coming soon and they would need the midwife. It was a festival week and members of the regular staff had the week off, so there were fewer people around to aid her with the children and the household. Lorenzo was too generous with the servants, and she was always the one who acquired extra work as a result. She rarely complained about it, knowing that it was a wife's lot to suffer, but in her ninth month of pregnancy Clarice was entirely without patience.

She knew that she was forbidden entry into Lorenzo's study. It was a Florentine tradition that wives were not permitted in their husband's private spaces, and Clarice had observed this rule without question until now. But in her panicked state of early labor, she needed assistance and was desperate to find Lorenzo. She ran to his *studiolo* and flung the door open without knocking.

She stopped in her tracks and blanched at the sight before her: an enormous image of a pregnant Lucrezia Donati dominated a mural of such foul paganism that Clarice was certain they would all go immediately to hell as a result of its presence in the house.

Lorenzo looked up from where he was auditing books from the Medici Bank in Lyon. He was surprised to see his wife here, and concerned. "Are you all right, Clarice? Is it the baby?"

Clarice held her hands on her swollen abdomen and nodded, but she had not taken her eyes off Sandro Botticelli's showpiece, as it covered the wall. When she finally spoke, her voice shook. "Lorenzo, I will not have that in my house."

"This is *my* house, Clarice." Lorenzo was annoyed, as he usually was with her, but he didn't snap as he could have. "And this is my private study. I will determine what I will or will not have in it without anyone else's perspective or assistance. I allow you to decorate elsewhere. This is the only space I control completely. Let me."

"But it is not fair, Lorenzo!" She was shrieking at him, her condition increasing her growing hysteria. "You ask too much, for me to endure such a thing. It is cruel. You pride yourself on your sense of justice and humanity. Why is it that you have never been able to apply those same principles to me, to your own wife?"

There was passion in her outburst, an emotion that Lorenzo had never seen in his years with her, as she continued.

"There is not a day of my life that I do not endure the torment of knowing you will never love me. There are three people in this marriage, and I am the least important of them. I know that, I live with it, and I try not to wilt from the constant winter that I live in as a result. Instead, I find the sun in my children. Our children. I do not ask for much, Lorenzo. But if you do not remove that horrible, pagan piece of furniture, I am going back to Rome and taking your children with me. Including your precious Maddalena."

Lorenzo was not one to be moved by threats or coercion, yet Clarice's words about justice had found their mark. He had never thought about her pain in all these years. It hadn't even occurred to him that she cared much, so indifferent had she been through their marriage. She endured the need for their coupling so that they might populate the Medici dynasty in exactly the same way that she approached preparing lunch or mending a cushion: each was a task to be carried out by a wife.

But with this outburst he saw that she was wounded, and he had wounded her. His remorse was sincere.

"I'm sorry, Clarice," he replied softly and with some tenderness.

The tears came unbidden as she stood before her husband, willing him to come to her, to hold her, to provide the warmth and comfort that she had dreamed of finding in him when she came to Florence as a terrified foreigner to marry a stranger. But they were too far gone for such displays; their silent war had been waging for too long. The best Lorenzo could provide for her

was concession as she stood before him, heavy with the exhaustion of pregnancy. His reply was gentle, if not warm.

“I will have the piece removed in the morning. Good night, Clarice.”

In the bravest moment of their married life, Clarice took a chance that cost her dearly. “Lorenzo, will you not ... can you not give me just one word of love?”

Lorenzo was truly puzzled. “Love, Clarice? In all our time as man and wife, I have never heard you use the word. Duty, yes. Love ... never. Forgive me if I have no context for this request from you.”

“Lorenzo, you are my husband ... and I ... I do love you.”

Lorenzo sighed, feeling a mixture of pity and sadness for the role he played in the unhappiness that fate had dealt to her. She was not, for all her flaws, an odious woman. She was merely a product of her family and her faith. His answer, while not pointedly cruel, was all that he could summon.

“Then, Clarice, I truly am most sorry.”

She ran from the *studiolo*, sobbing now, and back into the main house, where Madonna Lucrezia found her and returned her to bed to wait for the midwife.

The next day, Lorenzo had the masterpiece he and Sandro referred to as *The Time Returns* removed from the palazzo on Via Larga. Lorenzo had it reframed and made into the backing of an elaborate piece of furniture that he was determined to present as a gift for the wedding of his cousin, Lorenzo di Pierofrancesco. This other Lorenzo was also a student of the classics and would certainly appreciate the mythical elements of the work. Lorenzo asked Sandro to personalize it somehow, so that it would appear that the painting had been created for the Pierofrancesco side of the family. As their family emblem was a specific kind of sword, Sandro merely painted this weapon slung across the waist of Hermes.

Lorenzo di Pierofrancesco and his bride were delirious with the generosity of this grandiose wedding gift from their exalted cousin.

Lorenzo de' Medici, on the other hand, was devastated by the loss of the greatest piece of art that Sandro Botticelli had ever created. His consolation was that Clarice gave birth to a healthy and alert baby boy on the eleventh day of December. They named him Giovanni.



Colombina gave birth to her son in the company of her sister, Costanza, and Ginevra Gianfigliazza. Niccolò was away at sea.

The child's biological father was unable to attend.

Colombina wept through the pain of the birth, but she cried harder as she cuddled the beautiful little boy against her body later that night. He had a perfect nose and fine features, looking most of all like a male version of herself. Blessedly for all of them, the child had not been born with the Medici overbite or the smashed Tornabuoni nose. He would not be labeled as the bastard son of Lorenzo's whore through a misfortune of features. Colombina was grateful that he would be spared that.

And yet as she looked at him she wished, just a little, that there was more of Lorenzo to be seen in the child.

*Florence
April 1476*

GINEVRA GIANFIGLIAZZA sat in the window seat, staring out across the Arno. It was stormy today, dark and gloomy, and she felt the dampness in her bones. She did not rise to leave her place when Colombina entered. The women were too close for formalities, and each understood the moods of the other in the way that young women who have shared many secrets are uniquely able. Colombina did not greet her friend verbally, merely kissed her on the cheek before taking a seat opposite, with a similar vantage point overlooking the river.

Ginevra looked up finally, eyes red and swollen. She saw, without surprise, that Colombina's were the same.

"You see it too," Ginevra said simply.

Colombina nodded and then burst into tears. She put her head in her hands for the moment it took to let the worst of the emotion work through her body, before trying to speak.

"She is so ill, Ginevra. And she knows but does not speak of it. Why does she not tell anyone that she is dying? How can they not see it?"

Both women had visited the Vespucci household separately to look in on Simonetta, who had been bedridden for the last few days. Her coughing had increased and was producing blood. Still, her family seemed oblivious to the fact that Simonetta was clearly gravely ill. They were treating her condition as if it were just a little setback and to be expected, given that she was so weak of constitution.

"Because she hides it so well. And Simonetta is such a thing of beauty that

in her, the shadows on her face just serve to make the rest of her skin more translucent. The brightness in them does not look like fever; rather it enhances the unlikely color of her eyes.”

Colombina nodded. “I do not know what to do about Sandro. Or Lorenzo and Giuliano for that matter. They will be distraught, as will we all. But at least you and I are prepared for it. We have watched death stalk her for the last years, watched as it came closer and closer to our sweet girl. But the men in our midst are unprepared. They know she is fragile, but I don’t think any of them have actually accepted that we will lose her.”

“And soon.” Ginevra shivered.

“How long, I wonder? I need to hug her against me one more time and tell her that she is my sister of spirit and let her know just how much I love her.”

“Then I suggest you do so immediately, Colombina. After seeing her today, I do not think we have much time left with her. Perhaps we should send a messenger to Lorenzo and Giuliano. They will want to see her as well.”

Colombina paled. “Oh God, they aren’t here. They’re in Pisa on business, both of them. But they’ll be back in a few days, and I will have a messenger waiting for them as soon as they return to Florence. You don’t think ... we will lose her that soon? Oh, please don’t say so.”

Ginevra, usually the pillar of strength, began to sob. Simonetta was like her little sister, and she had grown to love her over the years. Losing her would be challenging to all of them, to everything they believed. What was God thinking, giving the world such beauty and then taking it away like this?



The messenger Colombina had prepared to send to Lorenzo and Giuliano ultimately made the long ride to Pisa with the message that she had most dreaded: Simonetta Cattaneo de Vespucci had died suddenly that same day, April 26, 1476.

No one had a chance to say good-bye.

Lorenzo and Giuliano took a long walk together that night, to talk about Simonetta and to share their grief over the young woman who had moved all of them with her purity and sweetness. They all loved her completely; she had become the official little sister of the Order.

“April twenty-sixth. It will forever be a day of sadness in our world, Giuliano. We must always honor her on this day.”

Giuliano nodded and pointed to the sky. “See that? The star that is brighter than the others? Is it Venus?”

“Perhaps,” Lorenzo answered. “Or perhaps our Simonetta is with God, and the light of her soul has merged with that star to create something as beautiful and bright as she was.”

“I will never have your gift of poetry, my brother. I can only say that I loved her and I will miss her, and I will pray that she is surrounded now by the same beauty and grace she brought to all of us.”

Lorenzo smiled at his little brother. “Who said you weren’t a poet?”

Returning to his room that night, Lorenzo wept at the loss of their beautiful little sister. As Angelo always prodded him, Lorenzo used his pain to inspire a poem, which would become a favorite of the Tuscan people, “O Chiara Stella,” Oh Beloved Star.

Simonetta was a piece of heaven now.



The funeral of Simonetta Cattaneo de Vespucci was an elaborate and somber occasion. Her casket was carried from her home to the church in Ognissanti by the Vespucci and Medici men who loved her. Thousands turned out in the city of Florence to mourn her. Perhaps the enormous attendance at her funeral was an indication that at the end of her all-too-short life, the people of Florence did indeed understand that they had lost a unique treasure.

Marco Vespucci did mourn her, but he remarried quickly. His new bride was homely but sturdy, a woman of the earth with whom he could lustily mate and actively procreate. While drinking in the Tavern at Ognissanti one night, he was overheard saying, “Goddesses are to be worshipped, but they are not meant to become wives. Simonetta was never meant for me. She belonged to the world. Ultimately, she belonged to God, and he called her back home, as heaven was incomplete without her.”



La Bella Simonetta.

She was the most exquisite thing I have ever seen. She was the troubadour muse—perfect, untouchable, divine.

People say that I was in love with her. Of course I was. So was everyone in the Order. Simonetta embodied love, and anyone who knew her experienced

that love. But it was not something as simple as Eros would definite it. It was not a physical yearning to possess something so lovely. Simonetta moved all of us beyond that and into an understanding of the nature of the living female aspect of God on earth. I truly believe, with all my heart and soul, that Simonetta was the true incarnation of Venus. And I painted her as such.

In Lorenzo's garden there is a statue from ancient Rome that is called the Medici Venus. She is naked perfection, her right hand covering her breasts in part, and her left draped over her most personal female area. I used that statue as the model for Simonetta's body, but the rest is all her: lengths of golden hair, creamy skin, copper-flecked eyes. She arises from the sea in a scallop shell, symbols of Asherah, our mother in heaven who is Beauty, and who is later known by the Greeks as Aphrodite and the Romans as Venus.

To the left, Zephyr and Chloris blow life into her, helping her to incarnate while moving from heaven to earth. She is surrounded by touches of real gold, a reminder to the viewer that what they are seeing here, True Beauty, which is also Love, is priceless and to be treasured.

To her right, a woman arrives to cover her with a red cloak draped in flowers. The woman is Colombina, who here represents the sister who would protect her against the harshness of the world. Though Colombina knows she is beautiful in her nakedness, she also knows that the world will not understand it and will abuse her for it, and she seeks to cloak her from the eyes of a world that does not deserve her.

I have draped Colombina in Lorenzo's symbol, the laurel leaves, and given her a girdle of pink carnations. Those flowers are a pun, carrying as they do the root of the word incarnation within their name.

The Birth of Venus is my tribute not only to Simonetta but to the beautiful sisterhood that exists within the Order. It is love personified.

I have asked to be buried at Simonetta's feet, in the same way in which Donatello chose to spend eternity alongside Cosimo. I shall submit the request in writing to Marco Vespucci to prove that I am indeed serious. I have no doubt that even her bones will be beautiful and will inspire me into eternity.

She was, indeed, the Unparalleled One.

I remain,

Alessandro di Filipepi, known as "Botticelli"

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*Florence
present day*

“THE ARRANGEMENTS are made, Bérenger. Meet me tomorrow afternoon at two in the Palazzo Vecchio,” Vittoria informed him from her cell phone. “We will be married by the magistrate in the Sala Rossa. The Red Room. It was once Cosimo de’ Medici’s bedroom. He conceived his children there. Appropriate, no?”

“Vittoria, why the mad rush? Why must we do this tomorrow? I need time. For the love of God, my brother is in jail and my family in chaos.”

“I told you, Bérenger, that this is just a civil ceremony at the town hall. Just between you and me. I need to see your commitment to our son and his destiny. No one else even has to know. Yet. We will plan a society wedding that the entire world will talk about for later in the year. October is beautiful in Tuscany.”

“Vittoria, please. I need—”

She wasn’t listening to a word of it. “I am not going to allow you to buy me off—or attempt to take my son. We are a package, Bérenger, and you will get both of us together. Which you should be grateful for. Do you know how many men would kill to have the chance to marry me?”

He tried another tactic. “Vittoria, I want to see you tonight, before the wedding. Just to talk. May I come over to your place? Some time after ten?”

Vittoria was delighted by the implication of a late-night rendezvous with Bérenger in her apartment. He was finally coming around, as she knew he would. Men always did. Always.



The time returns. That was the heretic’s favorite catchphrase, wasn’t it? It was their sickening motto that dated back even beyond the anti-Christ spawn Lorenzo de’ Medici and his adulteress whore. There was once a time when her uncle, Father Girolamo, could not even utter the name of Medici without choking on his own bile, so abhorrent was the legacy of that family to him and his ancestors. And combating that heretical legacy was the reason this sacred confraternity had been created in the first place all those years ago in Florence, created by his namesake, Girolamo Savonarola.

The diminutive Dominican friar came to Florence in 1490, somewhat ironically, through the invitation of Lorenzo de’ Medici himself. History was unclear as to why Lorenzo would have welcomed the fire-and-brimstone preacher, installing him at the head of the monastery in San Marco, the retreat so beloved of Cosimo de’ Medici. Savonarola’s sermons against sin and

frivolity were shocking to Florentines, who were not used to having the wrath of God rain down upon them in the way that Savonarola called for it. Lorenzo would come to regret his decision as soon Savonarola would condemn the Medici as tyrants, all the while preaching the evils of art. The Madonna was painted as an overpriced whore, he shrieked, taking Botticelli to task for his elaborate and beautiful *Madonna of the Magnificat*. He would escalate this campaign with the infamous bonfires of the vanities, mockeries of the elaborate festival events that Florence and the Medici had once been famous for. In Savonarola's Florence, the "festival" consisted of his followers knocking on doors and demanding items of vanity—luxury goods of any kind—to be donated to the enormous bonfire that would take place in the Piazza della Signoria. But the real treasure for Savonarola's followers, who were called by the cowed people of Florence the Piagnoni—meaning "the snivelers"—was art and literature. Nothing fed Savonarola's flames like paintings and poetry. These instruments of heresy had to be weeded out at any cost. And Girolamo Savonarola had been expert at destroying hundreds of pieces of art, which would be worth countless millions today.

Good riddance to bad rubbish, Felicity thought. As it stood, too much of it had survived.

Now that her uncle had lost his faith, it was up to Felicity to carry on the holy war against those who would continue the blasphemy started here by the Medici five hundred years earlier. She would be the one to continue Savonarola's work. There would be a new Renaissance, to be sure, but this rebirth would not be one of Lorenzo's heresy through the Paschal witch's blasphemy. It would be a resurrection of the great Savonarola's efforts to cleanse Florence of sin. She would re-create the bonfire of the vanities, beginning with the commemoration the confraternity was hosting this week in honor of the anniversary of Savonarola's death.

Having gained permission to create a bonfire in the courtyard behind Santa Felicita, Felicity was challenging confraternity members to gather vanity items, specifically books considered heretical and blasphemous, to feed the flames. She would supply copies of everything Maureen Paschal had ever published. She had versions in English and Italian.

Meanwhile, the American campaign had worked brilliantly. The confraternity members here in Italy had mobilized their sister organizations in the States to attack Maureen Paschal online in every possible forum. Some were hired guns, others were merely faithful followers who were willing to do whatever it took to stamp out such blasphemy as she created. But they had been quick and effective in spreading the rumors created in Rome against Maureen—and inspiring the death threats. The death threats were the icing on

the cake, the final, sweet element. When the media ran with the story that Maureen had been threatened, the confraternity's team hit the Web again with the rumor that Maureen's publicist had manufactured that rumor to gain more publicity and sympathy. It was a beautifully vicious circle, which appeared to be effectively chipping away at Maureen's reputation. And it was only the beginning. There was much more to come.

After Felicity's last encounter with the blasphemer and her cohort, she was more determined than ever to step up her campaign against their godlessness. Unfortunately, the Antica Torre, where they were living in Florence, was relatively impenetrable. She was still formulating the second half of her plan, the means by which she could eliminate the blasphemy permanently—by eliminating the blasphemer.

The time returns? she thought. *You bet it does.*

*Confraternity of the Holy Apparition
Vatican City
present day*

FATHER GIROLAMO DE PAZZI was making his final preparations for his departure to Florence. He was tired, so tired, and wanted nothing more than to stay in the sunny sanctity of Rome for the rest of his days. But there were too many pressing issues to be dealt with in Tuscany, and he could no longer sit idle when he knew so much.

Felicity would certainly have to be dealt with, but that was not his first priority. He knew that action was about to be taken to eliminate the Buondelmonti problem, and he would need to be in Florence to deal with the repercussions. The Confraternity of the Holy Apparition had existed for nearly five hundred years, and while its public purpose was to study and celebrate visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, it had a deeper, private purpose. The confraternity had become a rogue element operating outside the Vatican, one that made its own determinations about protecting the Church. If a threat was perceived, that threat was systematically eliminated.

Before his stroke, Girolamo de Pazzi had been the most effective and ruthless leader of the confraternity in the last century. There was a time when signing off on the death sentence of any enemy of the Church was effortless. Protecting the faith was necessary, a holy mission that he would not abandon. And while he still believed passionately in his Church, the events of the last three years had changed him. He was no longer willing to take lives quite so quickly or easily. This was what had caused the rift between him and Felicity, indeed between Girolamo and the rest of the confraternity. He had been put

out to pasture, essentially, once it was determined that he had been too soft on Maureen Paschal during the Book of Love debacle.

He was still a venerated elder who was worthy of respect, but he had been retired from making operational decisions for the confraternity. Still, the confraternity's new leaders in Rome had approached him for urgent consultation on this matter of Vittoria Buondelmonti. Father Girolamo was an expert on the bloodline families, the Order, and all their secrets. Did he believe that Vittoria Buondelmonti was dangerous to the established Church? What was she proposing to do with all this public posturing about her baby? Why was the paternity of this child so important? Their intelligence underground was effective enough to understand that she posed a threat to them, but they didn't understand the nuances of her plot.

The report Girolamo de Pazzi gave was distressing. It appeared that there was a high-level conspiracy among several of the noble families of Europe to unite behind this child, who they claimed was a messiah—perhaps even the Second Coming of Christ—and there was a clear threat to the Church within that strategy. It appeared to be a very serious threat, as the families involved had access to a great many secrets about the origins of Christianity. They were also in possession of priceless holy relics. Forces within the confraternity had tried for hundreds of years to get their hands on the Libro Rosso and the Spear of Destiny. Their goal was to stop them from ever becoming known beyond the secret societies, to keep their authenticity from ever being proven. The Libro Rosso was the most damaging single piece of evidence against the Church's authority that existed, whereas the Spear of Destiny held the power of victory over all opposition. Both were priceless and worth fighting for, regardless of the collateral damage.

The Buondelmonti threat was real, and it was therefore determined that Vittoria and her child must be removed from the game board. Vittoria had been followed and monitored by the confraternity since she made the announcement about her son. When it became known through their advanced intelligence operations that Vittoria was meeting with Bérenger Sinclair in Florence later that night, a plan was put into action.

They could kill three birds with one stone.

Girolamo de Pazzi would not give the order to harm Bérenger, Vittoria, and the child. Those days were over for him. But he knew that there would always be someone within the confraternity leadership who was willing to do whatever was deemed necessary to ensure the safety of the status quo and eliminate any threat. That was what the confraternity attracted, after all: the most fanatical element, the self-appointed soldiers for Christ who would take

any action they felt protected their Church.

Vittoria Buondelmonti had gone too far, and she would die as a result, as would the baby and his father. He had no doubt of that, nor could he stop it.

They were deemed to be an unholy trinity that threatened the Church, and they would be eradicated accordingly.

Florence
1477

LORENZO SIGHED heavily and took another large gulp of the strong wine from the elegant goblet on his desk, careful not to spill any on the official document that currently absorbed his complete attention. This particular piece of parchment represented one of the most challenging diplomatic puzzles of his life.

In his role as the head of the Medici Bank, now the most profitable and powerful banking institution in the world, Lorenzo was often petitioned to provide loans that were risky or otherwise unusual. Most often, these requests came from powerful personages: kings, cardinals, or influential merchants who knew how to wield their weight. Lorenzo had learned well by watching his grandfather handle these difficult problems masterfully. He had learned equally from witnessing his father botch these negotiations and create formidable enemies in the mishandling of these requests. Lorenzo understood that balance in such negotiations was critical. And this particular request, from no less than Francesco della Rovere, was going to be the most difficult he had ever considered.

There was nothing regal about Francesco della Rovere. He was a large man, uncouth and almost completely toothless, and fat in the manner that comes only from massive self-indulgence. There was little about his speech that could be called eloquent, despite the fact that he was well educated. He was clever in the way that all the della Rovere family were renowned to be: shrewd, manipulative, excessively ambitious, and entirely self-serving. This cleverness had lifted them out of the poverty-stricken fishing village where they originated and into the exalted place they currently held in Roman society. And none of the della Rovere clan had raised themselves up quite as high as the gruff, unpleasant, and enormously narcissistic Francesco della Rovere.

In fact, he was no longer known as Francesco della Rovere. Since 1471, he had been known as Pope Sixtus IV.

During his climb to the throne of Saint Peter, the man now known as Sixtus had bribed, traded, finagled, and promised his way through the maze of

Roman politics. No others benefited as well as his own family, most specifically his sister's relatives, the Riario family. Within a few months of attaining the title of Pope Sixtus IV, he bestowed the title of cardinal upon six of his nephews. This action coined a phrase that would be used for centuries into the future to illustrate the corrupt practice of rewarding unworthy family members with positions and power that were far better suited to others. From the Italian word for nephew—*nipote*—evolved the word *nipotismo*. Nepotism.

It was one of these “nephews” that was the source of Lorenzo's current predicament. There was much smirking when Girolamo Riario was mentioned. While he was recognized as one of the huge brood of Sixtus' nephews, it was whispered that Girolamo was, in fact, the illegitimate son of the pope. Unlike the other Riario boys, who had some charm and culture, although each was ostentatious and boastful, Girolamo was brash and uncouth, also given to corpulence in a way that showed a tremendous resemblance to his “uncle” the pope. It was often remarked, albeit in Roman whispers, that Girolamo's appearance and mannerisms proved that the apple did not fall far from the tree.

That his sister had kept his scandalous secret by claiming Girolamo as her own was one of many reasons that Sixtus was in debt to her and eager to hand out favors to his nephews.

And now the convoluted and often dirty family politics of the della Rovere and Riario family had landed squarely on Lorenzo's doorstep. These people and their corruption made him shudder with revulsion, and yet they were now the first family of Rome. Lorenzo had made the trek to the Vatican when Sixtus had ascended the throne, to pay his respects and to reaffirm the position of the Medici as the primary bankers to the Curia. They had been so for three generations, since the days when his great-grandfather, Giovanni, had first influenced papal politics by providing strategic loans to the Church. Pope Sixtus had embraced Lorenzo, welcoming him and assuring him that the Medici position was as strong as ever in Rome.

Lorenzo needed it to stay that way. Banking with the Church was a cornerstone of Medici profit. It also strengthened his position in other areas of Europe.

All these factors weighed heavily on Lorenzo's mind as he considered the papal request before him, which had arrived via messenger from Rome this morning. Pope Sixtus IV was requesting a loan of forty thousand ducats—a huge sum—for his so-called nephew Girolamo. It was a type of real estate loan, as the acquisitive Girolamo wanted to buy the town of Imola to add to his holdings.

The money wasn't the issue here. The bank could easily afford the loan, and it would be guaranteed by papal authority, so in that regard there was little risk. The complicating factor was the location of Imola and the unstable, aggressive nature of Girolamo himself. Imola was in a strategic position, just outside Bologna, therefore between Florence and the rich Emilia-Romagna region. It was the perfect base from which to expand one's holdings, if one were inclined to begin conquering and acquiring territories. And from what Lorenzo knew of Girolamo Riario, this was precisely what he was intending. Further, the largest road connecting Florence to the north ran through Imola and would be entirely controlled by the lord of Imola.

Essentially, if Lorenzo gave this loan to Girolamo Riario, he was endangering surrounding territories, which were under the protection of Florence. His Florence. And that was something he would never do, even under threat from the Curia.

Lorenzo denied the loan. He sent a messenger to Rome with a carefully drafted letter, indicating that the Medici bank was currently undergoing a series of changes in structure, and as a result loans of that amount were on a temporary hold. He was stalling, and everyone knew it—including Pope Sixtus IV.

Rome
1477

"THAT MERCHANT SON of a gout-stricken idiot and a Florentine whore!"

Pope Sixtus roared with anger when Lorenzo's reply was brought before him. He disrupted the bowl of fruit before him, grapes and cherries flying across the table as he gesticulated wildly. "How dare he refuse me!"

Girolamo Riario was petulant. He picked up one of the grapes and threw it in a fit of pique. "I want Imola. I *need* Imola!"

"I know that, you ingrate," snapped the pope. "Can't you see I am working on it? The Medici aren't the only bankers in Italy. Send for the Pazzi. They are always happy to pick up Lorenzo's scraps."

The Pazzi, whose name translated from Tuscan to mean "madmen," were a rival banking family from Florence who had deeply held jealousies toward the Medici monopoly. No doubt the Pazzi bankers would jump on an opportunity to ingratiate themselves into the papal circle. They were a family possessed of rogue personalities, exacerbated by their envy and their greed. A perfect match for what Sixtus needed at the moment.

"I will get the Pazzi here, then," Girolamo grumbled in his high-pitched

whine of a voice. “But that’s not enough. I want Lorenzo punished for his offense to me ... er, to you. How dare the Medici put himself above Your Holiness?”

“How dare they, indeed,” Sixtus said to himself as Girolamo left on his errand. The pope contemplated the current situation carefully. While it would have been so much simpler if the Medici had simply conceded and played the game according to plan, there were some benefits to be achieved from this turn of events. Lorenzo was far too powerful throughout Europe, enjoying the same respect as his grandfather before him. The expansion of the Medici banks into Bruges and Geneva, and now with talk of London, was proof that their wealth was becoming seriously problematic. And that wasn’t the worst of it. There was that great Medici secret that protected them across the continent, those royal ties they had that reached from Paris to Jerusalem and as far as Constantinople. Even the king of France referred to Lorenzo as “cousin,” and the damnable merchants from Florence had been allowed to use the royal fleur-de-lis in their family crest. It was the French royals’ way of showing their undying loyalty to the Medici. But why?

Pope Sixtus IV knew why. He had made it his business to know why. You didn’t reach the most powerful throne in the world without becoming a master of intelligence networks.

Pope Sixtus had spies in the Order of the Holy Sepulcher.

In the great morass of family feuds and extreme jealousies that darkened Florentine history, finding someone to turn on the Medici had not been difficult—or even terribly expensive. Sixtus would use his knowledge of the great Medici heresy as his ultimate weapon against them when the time was right, and when he would most benefit from its use. He would bring Lorenzo down, and in doing so, he would accomplish his larger goal: to bring the arrogant, independent Republic of Florence to its knees and acquire it as a papal state. There would be no greater acquisition in the history of the papacy thus far. Florence would be the shimmering jewel in his papal tiara. He would possess it, and no Medici would stop him.

And he knew exactly where to start. He would hit Lorenzo in a very personal place, just to get his attention and remind him who held the real power in Italy.

Florence
1477

ANGELO POLIZIANO WAS out of breath as he burst through the door of the *studiolo*.

“Lorenzo. A messenger. Sixtus ... he is trying to take Sansepolcro.”

Lorenzo ushered his friend in, placing a calming hand on his shoulder as he guided him to a chair. “Sit down, Angelo. Breathe. Now, start from the beginning.”

Angelo nodded. “A messenger has come from Sansepolcro. The pope has sent forces to Città di Castello. He has excommunicated Niccolò Vitelli for heresy and has announced his intention to place his own man there. He is claiming it as a papal property now.”

“He doesn’t want Città di Castello,” Lorenzo stated the obvious. “And he has no real quarrel with Vitelli. This is revenge on me, and on Florence because of me.”

The town of Città di Castello, while of strategic interest, sitting as it did at the southern border of Tuscany, was more important to Lorenzo for another reason: it was the nearest outpost to Sansepolcro. Sixtus was firing a warning shot at the Medici by threatening the Order. He didn’t dare invade Sansepolcro directly, which was a Florentine possession, as that would be an all-out act of war. But to claim the nearest outpost, and to insult the commander of that region, who was a Medici ally, was a highly calculated attack.

“What are you going to do?”

Lorenzo didn’t even have to think about it. If Sixtus was going to declare war so early in his reign, so be it. Florence would not allow bullying within its territories, or to its allies. He would convince the council to defend Vitelli and the town of Città di Castello. Six thousand Florentine troops seemed like a good start.



Despite the best efforts of Lorenzo and Florence to defend Vitelli, the Città di Castello fell to the forces of the pope. The defeated Niccolò Vitelli was welcomed into Florence as a hero, which was viewed by the papacy as a further act of war. It no longer mattered. Nothing that Lorenzo, or Florence, could do would serve to repair the seething hatred of Pope Sixtus IV. Lorenzo de’ Medici had become an almost singular obsession for him. The arrogant banker from Florence continued to flaunt his wealth and power in ways that Sixtus was certain were meant as intentional and repeated personal insults against his holy person and his esteemed family.

The divide between Florence and Rome deepened into a grand chasm when one of the Riario nephews died quite suddenly. Piero Riario, who held

the position of archbishop of Florence, had been the last della Rovere foothold in the republic. His death was a shock, and an unexpected blow to the plans of Pope Sixtus IV. Before Rome could interfere in the affairs of Florence, Lorenzo moved to have Clarice's brother, Rinaldo Orsini, appointed as the new archbishop of Florence. It happened so quickly that an Orsini was installed and holding the title before the intention was ever announced.

The pope was outraged that he had not been consulted. He appointed his own man, Francesco Salviati, as the new archbishop of Pisa in retaliation. But the lucrative port city of Pisa was a Florentine stronghold, and the laws of the republic indicated that the pope could not affect affairs in their democracy without express consent of the Signoria. That consent was refused, and the pope was told in no uncertain terms that Francesco Salviati would not become the archbishop of Pisa anytime soon. In fact, the Signoria decreed that the pope's man would not be allowed into Florentine territory at all.

Lorenzo had just added another venomous enemy to the mix. Francesco Salviati, denied the ability to take up his position as archbishop of Pisa and show his faithful service to Pope Sixtus, simmered in his own bile in Rome. The Medici upstart had gone too far. Surely there was something that could be done to punish him for his effrontery.

But Lorenzo did not feel he had gone nearly far enough. After the papal threat to his beloved Sansepolcro, it became clear to him that Sixtus understood the workings of the Order. Finding the traitor in Florence who was supplying information to Rome was one of the many items on Lorenzo's agenda. But first and foremost, he must protect his republic and its democracy from further papal incursion. Calling a meeting of the leaders of Milan and Venice, he proposed a dominant and intimidating Northern Treaty. The agreement was signed, and the message was clear: the northern Italian republics of Florence, Milan, and Venice would stand together against any further threat of papal tyranny. And there was a subtext to the message, one that was not lost on Pope Sixtus IV: Lorenzo de' Medici was more important to the rulers of Europe than he was.



The Pazzi were one of the oldest families in Florence, and one of the richest. They had created their fortune in banking in the same way the Medici had but were not as successful in leveraging that fortune into political power and social influence. They were rather infamous squanderers, spending outrageous amounts to build monuments to the family glory. This was in contrast to the successful Medici model, which instead invested in the

Florentine community in a way that inspired civic pride, stimulated the economy, and protected the arts.

Jacopo de Pazzi, the current patriarch of the family, had no great love for any of the Medici, although he had known both Cosimo and Piero well and had never been in any kind of real feud with them. There was little point. It was better to be a Medici ally than a Medici enemy. Jacopo was not an overly ambitious man; he did not seek to expand the Pazzi fortunes beyond what he currently possessed, as long as he remained comfortable. And he was a notorious gambler, a pastime that took a significant amount of his energy.

Thus when his nephew Francesco de Pazzi arrived in Florence with reports from the Pazzi bank in Rome, old Jacopo was not at all interested in listening to his ranting about overthrowing the Medici. It was a ridiculous idea, born out of Francesco's youth and inexperience.

"But Uncle, don't you see?" The younger man, wiry and fidgety, was pacing wildly around the room. "We can unseat the Medici once and for all. Rid Florence of Lorenzo the Tyrant."

Jacopo shrugged. "Lorenzo isn't a tyrant and you know it. Nor do the people of Florence believe that he is. This is a fool's errand, Francesco. And a dangerous one. We have secured the business of Sixtus for our bank, and I am very content with that."

Francesco blanched at this. "I secured the business of Sixtus! I did, because I am in Rome and I know the temperature there. I know what Sixtus wants, and what he wants is the end of the Medici. This is the greatest opportunity we will ever have."

"To do what?"

"To kill Lorenzo."

Jacopo spit out the wine he had just raised to his lips.

"You want to murder Lorenzo de' Medici? That's madness. And even if it weren't, if I should consider this even for a moment—which I will not—he has a brother. If you kill Lorenzo, Giuliano will inherit, and do so with the sympathy of the people of Florence. And those people will *not* support you."

"We'll kill them both. We will ensure that there will be no more Medici menace."

"I will hear no more of this talk in my house. Go back to Rome, Francesco. Such plotting does not belong here in our republic."

"Our family will never have any power in this state as long as the Medici rule. And as Catholics, we must defend the pope. Lorenzo has

deeply offended our Holy Father. He is a heretic who offers insult to the Curia at every turn and keeps the rightful bishop of Pisa from taking his position to minister to Tuscan souls.”

Jacopo got up to usher his nephew to the door. He had heard all he cared to on this day. Besides, there was a game of dice waiting for him at his favorite tavern in the Oltrarno.

“Save your self-righteous speeches for someone who has not known you since you were born, Francesco. I will not support any conspiracy for assassination, not because I bear any great love for the Medici, but because it is doomed to failure. Speak no more of this to me, and I will pretend I did not hear any of it.”

“But Uncle—”

“Go!” Jacopo pushed his nephew out the door and slammed it shut. He hoped that was the last he would ever hear of such a ridiculous idea as a coup d’état against the Medici.

Private chambers of Pope Sixtus IV
Rome
1477

GIAN BATTISTA DA Montesecco was uncomfortable. To begin with, he was a huge man sitting on an undersized chair, and he was forced to squirm every minute or two to rearrange his bulky frame in a way that would not unseat him. But his discomfort extended beyond the physical and had now permeated his mind and his spirit.

Montesecco was a hardened warrior, a mercenary who never knew anything other than battle and blood. He had been in the service of the Curia for all of his adult life, having inherited the needs of the della Rovere family with the accession of Sixtus IV to the throne. Most of the last few years had been spent in the service of the pope’s sniveling and demanding nephew, Girolamo, who was now the lord of Imola and never let anyone forget that. It was this particular “lord” who was whining at him now.

“My rule in Imola is not worth a pile of Tuscan beans as long as Lorenzo is alive! He opposes me at every turn; he ensures that no one in the Romagna will deal with me.”

Montesecco stayed silent. As a condottiere, a military commander, he knew that the only strategy in such an environment was to determine what the position of each man in the room was before speaking a word. What would a man die for? What would a man kill for? Until you knew the answer to those questions, no speech was safe. He looked to the two others in attendance here

in the small antechamber outside of Sixtus's private apartment. One, Francesco Salviati, was the shunned archbishop of Pisa. It was no surprise to Montesecco that there appeared to be little about this weasel of a man that was potentially holy. Salviati's beady eyes, set too close together over a hooked nose and prominent overbite, gave him a rodentlike appearance that was somewhat distracting when he spoke.

"The people of Florence will rise up against the Medici tyrants if we lead them! We will liberate them from Lorenzo and his hordes!" This was the rodent speaking.

Montesecco was a soldier, but he was not an ignorant one. He knew that Lorenzo was largely beloved of his people, who had called him *il Magnifico* since he was a teenager or younger. The Medici had always worked the common folk effectively and donated generously to those causes that supported the needy. What hordes was Salviati speaking of, that he thought Florentines would rise against? Artists? Philosophers? Poets? But the weasel-man was still ranting. Finally, an annoyed Montesecco interrupted.

"Beware of taking on the entirety of Florence. It is ... a large and unruly place for those who are not on the inside. And no one is more inside than Lorenzo de' Medici."

Salviati wrinkled his nose in disgust, exaggerating his rodent face. "You dare to challenge me on the affairs of Florence? I am the archbishop of Pisa! A Tuscan! I know Florence better than any man in Rome, and I speak for the people when I say I am certain they will view us as liberators if we destroy the Medici."

Montesecco nodded but said nothing. He would bide his time now until they were called in to the papal chambers for their meeting with Sixtus. At the end of the day, he was the pope's mercenary, and he would carry out the will of the Curia. If Sixtus told him to kill Lorenzo, then Lorenzo was as good as dead. However, given the caliber of men in this chamber who would acquire power if the Medici were destroyed ... well, God help the Florentines.

The three men were escorted into the papal chambers, where Montesecco was exceedingly happy to stretch his legs and settle onto a more comfortable, and certainly wider, upholstered bench. Girolamo Riario sat in the chair closest to his uncle, slumped in his typically petulant posture, while the archbishop Salviati took the bench adjacent to Montesecco. Pope Sixtus IV sat behind a gilded desk, pulling apart a pomegranate, which he ate throughout the interview, spitting the seeds into a silver dish between sentences.

"And so, gentlemen, on to this affair of Florence. Montesecco, I am

exceedingly anxious that we should find a way to ... shall we say ... neutralize the terrible threat that the pernicious heretic Lorenzo de' Medici has made to me and to my holy office.”

Pomegranate juice dripped from his chin as he turned to Salviati. “Archbishop, what say you?”

“I say, Holy Father, that there is only one way to neutralize the Medici family and that is through the death of both brothers.”

Pope Sixtus IV dropped his pomegranate and pounded his chest dramatically with his open hand. “I cannot condone murder, Archbishop. It does not become my sacred office. And while Lorenzo is a terrible villain, and his family are all heretics, I cannot ask for anyone’s death. I ask only for a change in the government of Florence.”

Girolamo, sitting up in his chair now, chimed in with his high-pitched whine. “Of course, Uncle, we realize that you are not telling us to kill Lorenzo. Don’t we, gentlemen?” He waited for the obligatory nodding of heads before continuing. “But we’re just asking, really, that if such a thing were to happen—accidentally, in the course of attempting to change the government in Florence—would you pardon anyone who was directly or indirectly involved in Medici death?”

Pope Sixtus IV looked across at the man who looked a little too much like a younger version of himself. The expression on his face was one of absolute disgust, as if he wanted nothing more than to hurl the remainder of the pomegranate at Girolamo Riario.

“You are a fool, and I will insist that you do not say another word about this in the presence of my holy person.” He turned his gaze to Salviati and Montesecco. “You gentlemen have heard me clearly. Under no circumstances have I, the heir to the throne of Saint Peter, condoned murder. I have only said that a change in government to remove the poisonous Medici family from power would be extremely pleasing to your Holy Mother Church. Montesecco, I have great faith in your abilities to make that happen, and will leave those details in your capable hands. I will provide all the troops you may require to back up such an endeavor. That is all. Now out with you.” He glared pointedly at Girolamo. “*All of you!*”



The three conspirators moved to the apartments of Archbishop Salviati to begin planning the attack on the Medici in earnest. All three agreed that they

had heard the same thing in the papal chambers: kill Lorenzo and the necessary members of his family if you must, just as long as that blood never leads to the back door of the Vatican.

Montesecco was dispatched to the Romagna region to begin assembling troops to back up their attack on Florence, in the event that Salviati wasn't entirely accurate in his assessment that the citizens of the republic would enthusiastically support the cold-blooded assassination of their favored prince. In his desire to gain the measure of the man he was to murder, Montesecco would carry a letter to Lorenzo from Girolamo Riario, extending his hand in friendship and forgiveness as the lord of Imola. This would give the condottiere the opportunity to see Lorenzo in his home and sum up the character of his target while taking stock of his potential weaknesses.

Lorenzo was at his villa in Caffagiolo with members of the Orsini family, as one of Clarice's brothers had passed away suddenly. Despite the somber mood in the household, Lorenzo welcomed this unexpected visitor and was a most gracious and hospitable host. He invited Montesecco to join him for dinner and engaged the man in long and interested conversation about his military history. In doing so, Lorenzo was just being himself: his interest in human nature was one of the great qualities of both a poet and a prince. For as long as he lived, his philosophy was that every single human being one encountered presented an opportunity to learn something unique through the eyes of that person. Lorenzo, like his grandfather before him, collected people and their experiences.

Montesecco was completely taken aback by his unexpected reaction to Lorenzo de' Medici. Hardened soldiers who killed for a living were not easily charmed. But this man, this Florentine prince, was unlike any other he had ever encountered. None of the so-called holy men he had ever worked for in the Curia had such elegance, grace, and impeccable hospitality. During his evening in Caffagiolo, Montesecco watched Lorenzo play with his children, show affection to his beloved brother, treat his mother with extraordinary love and respect, and handle an entire household of guests and servants seemingly without effort. Throughout the course of the evening, the condottiere had to remind himself repeatedly: this man is the enemy. His weakness is his family. He has no weapons at hand and is relaxed and comfortable in his own environment. Clearly, killing him—and the shy, kind younger brother, Giuliano—would be best accomplished within the false security of their own home. He could easily get weapons into a Medici dinner party, given what he had witnessed here tonight.

And yet for all the plotting, Montesecco could not release himself from the regret that he had been chosen to kill a man such as this. Lorenzo was full of

humor, approachable, and a brilliant conversationalist; when he spoke of the people of Florence, there was no hauteur or scorn, there was only true concern—even love. He was, in short, worthy of the title his people gave him.

Lorenzo was magnificent.



Montesecco was a soldier and a mercenary, and that combination of obedience and materialism moved him through his uncharacteristically emotional state of regret about murdering Lorenzo. He had to push on and do what he had been charged by his pope to do, which was bring about a change in Florentine government. That could only happen through the elimination of Lorenzo de' Medici and his brother.

A series of meetings was carried out in the Pazzi household, with the old patriarch Jacopo in attendance. He had continued to resist the idea of murder for the personal gain of his family, until Montesecco convinced him that the endeavor had the blessing of the pope. This fact was given evidence by the number of troops that were being moved toward Florence in anticipation of containing the expected rioting that was sure to erupt in the early stages of chaos as the coup was staged in the republic.

Jacopo de Pazzi finally gave in and threw his hat in with the conspirators. While he wasn't precisely enthusiastic about the idea of murder, he was opportunistic enough to go along with the plot if it was indeed sanctioned by the pope. The deaths of Lorenzo and Giuliano would enable the Pazzi family to take over the majority of important banking in Italy and establish themselves as the first family of Florence under the guise of "liberators." He even allowed his nephew Francesco to convince him that they might deserve that title. Surely the people of Florence would realize that they had been under the heel of a despot once they had been released?

Jacopo recommended the first of several failed plans to kill the Medici brothers. He was of the opinion that murdering Lorenzo in Rome was far more efficient and less likely to inspire rioting in the streets of Florence. Also, in separating the brothers and using two teams of assassins, there might be less chance of missing one of them. Unfortunately for this idea, Lorenzo declined all invitations to go to Rome. There was too much pressing business at home, and the last thing he needed was to trek south to a place he more often than not found tedious.

Following the implosion of this divide-and-assassinate approach, Montesecco reiterated his observations that the Medici family were completely unprotected on their home territory, and he recommended that

both brothers be taken out simultaneously in the middle of some grand entertainment at one of the villas. Knowing Lorenzo's reputation for hospitality and having experienced it firsthand, he recommended creating a scenario that would require the Medici to play host to a significant crowd.

It was the once reluctant Jacopo de Pazzi who created a new scenario. He suggested inviting the pope's youngest nephew, seventeen-year-old Raffaello Riario, to Florence to celebrate the fact that he had just been made a cardinal. The title was ridiculous for one so young, but apparently it was impossible to be a nephew of Sixtus IV and not possess it. Raffaello was studying at the University of Pisa, so he was conveniently located in Tuscany. He was also too young and innocent to understand that he was the bait for a poisonous trap. The youngest Riario came to Florence gladly, excited to be the center of such esteemed attention. Once comfortably installed in Jacopo de Pazzi's home, he sent a letter of introduction to Lorenzo de' Medici.

True to form, Lorenzo immediately invited Raffaello to the villa in Fiesole, where he was staying with Giuliano for a few days, at his brother's request. The plot to murder the Medici was now in place. All the conspirators had to do was determine the means of murder: arsenic, or daggers to the heart?

The Medici villa at Fiesole
1478

LORENZO WAS WORRIED about his brother. Giuliano had been acting strangely and for the first time in their lives together would not confide in him. He had begged Lorenzo to come to Fiesole, promising to explain once they were both in the house there together and away from the gossips in Florence. But so far, Giuliano hadn't revealed anything. In fact, strangely, he had disappeared at dawn without a word to anyone but the head groom, who had prepared his horse.

Lorenzo would wait patiently for a day or two and enjoy the air of tranquility—and the unparalleled views of Florence, with its magnificent Duomo in the distance. Cosimo had been the primary force behind financing the masterpiece of architecture that brought nobility from all over Europe to view its magnificence. Indeed, the great works of art in the center of the city were all tributes to Cosimo's vision. The massive bronze doors of the Baptistery, the expansion of the cathedral, and the unprecedented dome, which was the largest and highest ever built, had all been instigated and at least partially financed by Medici money.

Lorenzo, happy to leave Clarice and the children in town with his mother, brought Angelo along for further company. Perhaps they would find time to work through his latest pieces of poetry. Lorenzo's poetry was suffering of

late as a result of the complex politics he was forced to navigate, and he longed for the time to focus on his own art form. And while Lorenzo had also hoped to find a way to get Colombina out to Fiesole for a day, he had not been successful in that venture. He was missing her desperately, but it had become nearly impossible to get her away from Florence now. She was committed to her work with the Master, who was living in the city near her, in addition to the duties she had with her son.

He felt the catch in his throat each time he thought of the little boy with the dark eyes who was now three, and by all accounts precociously intelligent. Lorenzo had little time to consider the great sadness of his personal life, on this day or any other, but it hung as a constant haze that covered his otherwise privileged existence.

He was in search of Angelo when he first heard the commotion in the stable yard. Yelling, lots of it, and the whinnying of horses.

Running out toward the commotion, Lorenzo's heart skipped several beats as he saw Giuliano being carried on a litter, perfectly still, by two of the stable hands and another man he did not know.

"What has happened?" he yelled at anyone and everyone.

"He fell from his horse," said the unknown man, who then introduced himself as the majordomo of a neighboring family. "I was out inspecting the lands and I found him. He is breathing, and nothing appears to be broken, but he must have hit his head quite hard, as he has been unconscious all the while. There is a doctor in the village who has already been summoned, but I suspect you will want to call in your own."

Lorenzo began shouting orders to send for the best physician in Florence, to get a message to his mother, and to prepare the house for Giuliano's comfort. Once his brother was settled into bed, Lorenzo sat beside him, wiping his head with a damp cloth and speaking to him gently. Giuliano began to stir, groaning with pain as his consciousness began to return.

"Giuliano, are you in there?" Lorenzo teased him gently as he saw his brother's eyelids flicker. Even though Giuliano had been twenty-five years on earth, he would always be Lorenzo's baby brother.

"Hmm ... I fell. I was riding too fast and it was ... not full light. Ow, my head!"

Giuliano clutched his head in pain and squirmed in the bed.

"What else hurts?"

"My leg. Left. I fell on it." Giuliano, coming to full consciousness now,

reached down to feel around his left thigh to his knee. "I can bend it, and I don't think it's broken, but it is well twisted."

"Well, you won't be riding anywhere for a few days, so you better get comfortable. And maybe now that you have nothing better to do, you can tell me why you are acting in such an odd way."

"Fioretta," Giuliano said simply.

Ah. A woman. Lorenzo had suspected as much but had been unsure. While Giuliano was the object of desire of all Florentine girls, he had never shown any real interest toward one in particular and had resisted all attempts to marry him off. Again, he was blessed with the privileges of the second-born: all the benefits and none of the responsibilities. Giuliano was free to play, and play he did. His was a carefree life compared to Lorenzo's, and yet there was no envy on either side. Both brothers were living the lives they were created for, and they were content to do so.

"Fioretta Gorini. She lives just up the hill. Daughter of a shepherd, Lorenzo. Penniless. Little education. I could never be with her. But she is sweet beyond words. Innocent, lovely ... like an angel. She has eyes the color of amber ..." He drifted off for a moment, and Lorenzo wasn't sure if it was the fall or if Giuliano was actually in the throes of real love.

"At first, I thought it was just passing fancy. But it is not. When I am not with her, I think of nothing else. After I have been with her, it is worse." Giuliano tried to sit up as he described the feeling, but his brother's strong hands returned him to a supine position. "Oh Lorenzo, I never understood entirely about Colombina, but I do now. And I am sorry for all that you have been kept from, my brother."

Lorenzo nodded, surprised at the tears burning behind his eyes as his brother talked about experiencing real love for the first time.

"Do you know that feeling, Lorenzo, after you have been with the woman you love? You can still feel her on your body; she is present in every pore. You can smell her skin on yours and feel the silky creaminess of her still beneath you ..." He closed his eyes for a moment, lost in the magic of love, before continuing.

"That's Fioretta. And I came here ... I brought you here ... because she is with child. My child. And she went into her birthing pangs last night, and I was riding at first light to see if she was delivered safely. Lorenzo, you must send someone to her immediately. Please. I must know if she is safe, and I must know if my child is born."

The doctor from Fiesole arrived as Giuliano completed his revelation.

Lorenzo brought the physician to his brother, and as he left the room, he offered, “I am sending someone now to gather the news that you require, dear brother. Try to sleep and do not give the doctor any trouble.”

Lorenzo knew exactly whom he was going to send, but first he had an errand to run.



The Gorini home was small and certainly modest, but it was beautifully kept, showing touches of love. Carefully planted spring flowers absorbed what was left of the afternoon sun. Lorenzo’s errand had taken longer than anticipated, but he was satisfied that he had been able to attain what he was searching for.

A child played in the garden, a little girl about ten years of age. She smiled at Lorenzo as he dismounted.

“Is your horse nice?” She was just bold enough to speak to him.

“He is particularly nice if you rub his nose.” Lorenzo smiled at the girl. “Here, I will hold his reins and you can pet him very gently, right there. His name is Argo.”

The girl, who was fine-boned and delicate, like a tiny bird with long black hair, approached Argo carefully. She reached out to touch the stallion’s velvety nose as Lorenzo steadied him. After a moment she turned dark eyes to Lorenzo.

“Have you come to see the baby?”

Lorenzo nodded. “Has the baby arrived?”

The girl smiled, excited to discuss the new arrival. “He came this morning. I have only seen him for a moment. He was covered with blood and sticky, but he cried very loud and Mother said that is good. Fioretta was sleeping, so I came out here.”

The sound of the front door opening startled both of them. An older woman called to the girl sharply, “Gemma! Who are you talking to ... ?” The woman’s voice trailed off when she saw the face of the visitor. The most famous man in Florence was standing in her garden.

“Il Magnifico ...” She wiped her hands on her apron—which appeared to be covered in birthing blood—but didn’t move from the doorway. She appeared to be stunned as she tried to continue. “I ... Oh! Have you come to take the baby?”

Lorenzo wasn’t sure what she meant. His reply was simple. “I have come

to see Fioretta and to send her my brother's love. He rode out here this morning to be with her but fell from his horse."

The woman raised her hands to her face and gasped. "Is he—"

"He will be fine, Madonna Gorini. He is bruised and hit his head badly but appears to be coming around nicely. No bones broken. But he is most distressed that he has no news of Fioretta and his child."

The woman began to speak but then burst into tears. She ran out to where Lorenzo was standing with Argo. "Oh Magnifico, please forgive me. I ... I told Fioretta that your brother would not come. That he would never care about a poor shepherd girl and her bastard child. I did not want her to have expectations that any Medici would care about the likes of us ..."

Lorenzo wrapped Argo's reins around the fence post and moved to put his hand on Fioretta's mother's shoulder, soothing her. "He cares very much. As do we all."

The woman was sobbing harder now. "Then, I saw you here and I thought ... dear God, he has come to take the baby away from Fioretta. It will kill her. And the birthing was already so hard on her ... She is so weak."

Lorenzo was now the one feeling shock. It hadn't occurred to him that Fioretta might be in any danger from the birth. "What? Is she all right?"

"She lost much blood, and the baby is large. You Medici men are tall, and my Fioretta has fine bones ..." Lorenzo flashed for a moment on the news of Colombina's delivery of his own child three years earlier. That baby had been hard on his mother's tiny frame as well. He had been worried to death for weeks that Colombina would not recover.

"There are two doctors at our home in Fiesole now. I shall send both to Fioretta immediately. Is she well enough that I may speak to her? And may I see the baby?"

Madonna Gorini nodded, wiping her hands on her apron nervously, and ushered Lorenzo the Magnificent into the tiny shepherd's cottage where she lived with her beloved daughters.



Lorenzo reached out for the tiny bundle and laughed out loud as the infant was placed in his arms. "He is the image of Giuliano! Lucky boy. He got the best of the Medici blood without the worst of it." Lorenzo was forever referring to himself as the ugly Medici, while Giuliano was the beautiful one.

But this baby was definitely a Medici—strong features, long nose, piercing dark eyes, lots of glossy black hair.

A tiny voice from the next room interrupted him.

“Giuliano?”

The voice was weak and tired. And so hopeful.

Lorenzo looked at Madonna Gorini, who took the baby from him and indicated he should go into the bedchamber to speak with Fioretta.

“I am sorry to disappoint you.” Lorenzo smiled as he entered the room. This was probably the only woman in Florence who would be disappointed to see Lorenzo de’ Medici enter her bedchamber.

“Oh!” Fioretta was struggling to sit up. “Lorenzo! I ...” She gave up, too weak to do so. Lorenzo came to the edge of the bed and knelt beside it.

“Rest yourself, sister.” He smiled at her, and she looked at him strangely. Even though she was extremely pale and weak from the delivery, Lorenzo could see what his brother was so taken with here. The girl was beautiful in a way that was absolutely pure. Her skin was like milk, and he could tell that her mass of dark hair, tied behind her though it was, was glossy and very long. But it was her eyes that totally arrested him. Giuliano was right, they were the color of the amber that came from the Baltic Sea. Huge and clear, she stared at him with those eyes now.

“Sister ...,” she whispered. “How I wish I could be.”

“You already are,” Lorenzo offered gently, stroking her hand. “You are the mother of Giuliano’s son, Fioretta. That makes you family. But more than that, my brother loves you.”

“But he did not come.”

“Yes, he did.” Lorenzo explained the events of the morning, assuring Fioretta that Giuliano would recover. Her distress at the idea of his being injured was profound.

Amber eyes filled with tears as she looked at Lorenzo. “He is my life. My heart, my soul, everything I am. It is all Giuliano. I love him so. I wish that he were not a Medici. Do not hate me for saying so, Magnifico. But if he were simple, like me, we could be together. We would marry and raise our child ... our children, perhaps.” She stopped as the tears flowed harder. “It can never

be, I know.”

Lorenzo’s own eyes were stinging. How he knew this feeling of wanting to die more than to be separated from the one person in his life who represented the sun, the moon, and the stars. There was no light without her. No life.

“Fioretta, Giuliano sent me something to give to you. Here.”

Lorenzo removed a heavy velvet pouch from the deep pocket within his doublet and handed it to the exhausted girl. He helped her as she raised herself up on one arm to release the drawstring. A cascade of amber spilled out onto the woolen bed sheet.

Fioretta gasped as she held up the gift between her fingers. It was a chain crafted entirely of amber beads and flawless pearls, the necklace of a queen. It was worth a fortune.

“Giuliano said that the amber beads are the color of your eyes, and the pearls represent your eternal beauty, like that of Aphrodite, and that his love for you is deeper than the sea itself.”

Fioretta cried as though her heart would break and clutched the beads to her breast.

Lorenzo continued. “It is his promise to you, Fioretta, his promise of love, which will not be forsaken. And with it I give you my own pledge. You are my sister, and your child is as beloved to me as my own son. Come what may, sweet one, you will be a part of the Medici family forever.”

And to punctuate Lorenzo’s pledge, the baby—who would be named Giulio—cried out for his mother, in need of his dinner.



Madonna Lucrezia de’ Medici was firmly in charge at Fiesole by the time Lorenzo returned. She was clucking over Giuliano, ever her baby. But Lorenzo saw the strain in his mother’s face. For all her strength, she was the most tender-hearted woman in the world where her family was concerned. She worried for her sons now more than ever.

“Yours are still babies, Lorenzo,” she said to her elder son. “You know the natural fears that a parent has when children are small. But do not think it gets better, my son. It is only harder as your children grow. The world gets harsher for them and there is more to fear. All I have ever really wanted was for all of you to be safe and happy. And yet, those two qualities are very difficult to provide, even for the most devoted parents.”

Lorenzo was pleased that his mother was thinking and speaking of the health and well-being of children. He wanted to approach a difficult subject with her, and she had given him an opening.

“Mother, I know you have given me everything in your power, and what you could not give me was out of your hands ...” He did not need to finish the thought. His mother was well aware of the anguish Lorenzo had endured as a result of his separation from Colombina. He had developed a compatible relationship with Clarice overall, and she was a very competent wife and an excellent mother. But Lucrezia de’ Medici knew that she and her husband had sentenced their elder son to a loveless life when they arranged that marriage.

“What I am saying to you is that you have a chance to give that happiness to Giuliano. Let him marry Fioretta. Let us bring her into the family and raise little Giulio as a Medici, which he is.”

Lucrezia flinched. When she had been told about the shepherd girl and her newborn bastard grandchild, she wasn’t entirely surprised. It wasn’t uncommon that well-born boys would tumble the occasional peasant girl. The countryside was filled with nameless children as a result. And even Cosimo had produced a bastard son with a Circassian slave girl. That child, Carlo, had indeed been raised as a Medici and had even been accepted by Cosimo’s wife, Contessina. Lucrezia often referred to her mother-in-law as Saint Contessina as a result.

“Lorenzo, I am happy to raise the child in our family. He has Giuliano’s blood. But there is no need for him to marry the girl for that to happen. We will adopt him and educate him and see to it that he has all he needs.”

“You’re missing the point, Mother,” Lorenzo snapped, more harshly than he meant. His deep-seated anger from his own past was creeping into the conversation now. “He loves her. She isn’t just a girl he tumbled when he came upon her in the fields one day while hunting. And she isn’t a trollop. They are in love. And just once, wouldn’t it be glorious if someone in this family was actually allowed to marry for love? To completely participate in and fulfill the ideals and beliefs which we all hold so dear?”

“I have done everything you want. I married whom you wanted and have secured heirs for both the family and the Order. Giuliano does not need to do any of those things.”

“But he is destined for the Church, Lorenzo!”

“Is he? Really? He is twenty-five years old, Mother, and he has not taken vows because he does not want to. And he will not be able to take a position in the Church as long as that criminal Sixtus is on the throne of Saint Peter. So

perhaps it is time we were all honest here. Let Giuliano live his life in a way that makes him happy. Shouldn't one of us at least get to do that?"

Madonna Lucrezia was speechless. Lorenzo rarely raised his voice to the mother he adored to the point of worship, so when he did, it had an impact. But he had spoken his piece and now needed to get out of the oppressive atmosphere of the villa. He left his mother to think about what he had said and went to take a walk under the stars of Fiesole.

Lorenzo remembered as he did so that he was supposed to host a dinner here the next night for the pope's young nephew and some of the Pazzi family. He would have to send a messenger into Florence to cancel it. Giuliano would not be well enough for visitors for at least a few more days.



Gian Battista da Montesecco had a sore head, a heavy heart, and a bad temper.

He had spent the previous evening drinking in a tavern in the Ognissanti district. Hoping to drown all his reservations about what he had come to Florence to do, he had ducked into one of the seedier-looking dives to divert his attention in the way that soldiers did best—with too much wine and inexpensive women.

It was as if God were laughing at him. It seemed that everyone within the tavern, from the old man nursing his drink in the corner to the saucy bar wench who lifted her skirt for him in an upstairs room, had a story to tell about Lorenzo de' Medici. Each was a grander tale of magnanimity than the one that preceded it: Lorenzo never called in my father's loan, Lorenzo rebuilt our church when the ceiling collapsed, il Magnifico funded the confraternities which allowed the poor boys of our district access to a fine education, the Medici were the reason that Florence was the most beautiful city in Europe. It went on and on—for hours. The men worshipped him and the women swooned over him. It was nauseating. And depressing.

What cards had he been dealt, what terrible destiny was in play, that he had been chosen to kill someone like this? Why was it that his hand was the one selected to plunge a dagger into the heart of the man whom these people called their prince? A man who by all accounts—including Montesecco's own observation—was in truth a rare, noble, and generous servant of the people?

And by whom had he been chosen? Who was it who wanted to murder this prince? A fat, nasty, arrogant, acquisitive son of a fisherman who manipulated his way to the throne of Saint Peter, and his fatter, nastier bastard of a son. A

bitter, rabid weasel of a man who thought that possessing the title of archbishop somehow made him immune to the laws of God and men, and a twerpy, unscrupulous banker who had more ambition than sense. These characters were supposed to stand for something noble, perhaps even holy, in their leadership. Leadership was something that a soldier looked for—the ability to inspire people and be uncompromising and fearless. He saw this quality in Lorenzo de' Medici, certainly. But not in Pope Sixtus IV or any of his entourage. None of those men would ever inspire by leadership. They would only manipulate through fear.

As the night wore on and Montesecco fell deeper into his cups, he had entered into a conversation that was somewhat hazy to him now, in the harsh light of day and with a head that felt as if his horse had stepped on it. The old man in the corner had called him over. A strange old man, ancient in appearance, he had been sitting alone all night as if waiting for something. Montesecco stumbled to his table and sat as instructed, asking the old one, “Are you a soldier?”

The old man smiled slightly and nodded; the left side of his face puckered up when he smiled, as there was a huge scar that covered his cheek.

“That looks like a battle scar, old man.”

“Indeed it is, my friend. For I have done terrible battle with myself and my conscience, just as you are doing now.”

Montesecco was drunk, but he was still conscious enough to be taken aback

“How do you know what I am thinking, ancient one?”

“Because I *am* ancient. And because I know the look of a soldier in turmoil. You are wondering if you have chosen wisely, aren't you? If you are on the right side of your battle? Remember, warrior, that while you are a soldier and you follow orders, God gave you a mind and a heart and a conscience so that you could make such choices of life and death for yourself. In the end, the only real battle is between you and your soul. Choose wisely, friend. Choose wisely.”

“I am a mercenary. There is only one side, and that is the side where the money is.”

“Really? And what will that money bring you if you gain it all and lose your soul? Or even if you die in the attempt?”

“All war has risk. Dying in the attempt is a part of what I do.”

“Yes, but the odds are against you this time, friend. This is not a battle you

can win. You are on the wrong side. Your opponent is stronger than you can ever know.”

Montesecco, too deep into the wine to be discreet, was wrestling with his own demons. He banged his hand on the table for emphasis. “But I am employed by the pope himself! I fight on the side of the Church! Who could possibly be stronger than that?”

The old man shook his head at the war-torn soldier and sighed, the ragged and ancient sound of a man who had seen too much of this particular battle.

“God is your opponent. You cannot win this battle, soldier, because your opponent is a man who is under the protection of God.”

Montesecco had heard enough, and what he was hearing from this disconcerting old man was causing him to squirm. He laughed in the old man’s face as he rose to leave the table. “God, is it? And I suppose next you are going to tell me that Lorenzo de’ Medici is one of the archangels!”

And as the condottiere turned his back on the aged stranger with the scarred face, he thought he heard the old man say after him, “You have no idea just how right you are.”



And now here was Montesecco in the early afternoon, back in the house and company of Jacopo de Pazzi and his annoying nephew, looking at the ratty face of Archbishop Salviati as he raged.

“The Medici escape us again. Damn Giuliano and his ineptitude on horseback! I wanted them both dead tonight!”

Montesecco thought about the old man in the tavern. Maybe God had pushed Giuliano de’ Medici off his horse yesterday so that he would escape his assassination. He shook the thought from his head, groaning inwardly at how much that effort still hurt.

“We need another plan,” said Francesco de Pazzi. “I still think we use young Raffaello Riario as bait. Lorenzo has a weakness for students—he likes to talk their ears off about all his Plato nonsense—and this one is the pope’s nephew. We send Lorenzo another letter from Raffaello, saying that he wants to see their art collection at the Palazzo Medici. Raffaello is set to attend his first Mass here next Sunday, so we can suggest a banquet in his honor, to coincide with the High Mass next week.”

Montesecco realized at that moment that he wanted nothing more than to hit Francesco de Pazzi in the face. He said more calmly than he felt, “Next

Sunday is Easter. You would murder the Medici brothers on the feast day of the resurrection of Our Lord?”

Archbishop Salviati snapped back, “We are doing God’s work, freeing Florence of a tyrant for the protection of the Holy Church. Choosing a holy day for our task will only bring us Godspeed in accomplishing our goals.”

Jacopo de Pazzi looked at Montesecco across the room, with a hard and knowing glance. The two men locked eyes long enough to know that each had deep reservations about this plan. It was not what they signed up for. And each day, it appeared to be getting worse.



A week later, the conspirators were back in the de Pazzi palazzo and frustrated once again. Francesco de Pazzi had gone to the Palazzo Medici on the Via Larga to check on the arrangements for the banquet in the young cardinal’s honor. They had decided on poison, arsenic being the quickest, and as such it was necessary to discuss seating arrangements with Mona Lucrezia de’ Medici. Lorenzo’s wife, Clarice, was never consulted on entertainments. Her Roman customs had never been welcomed in Florence and she preferred to run aspects of the household that dealt with her children. Thus it was still Lorenzo’s competent and hospitable mother who ran the Medici entertainments. Francesco fussed about protocol and seating preferences with Lucrezia. He insisted that because Montesecco had been so taken with Lorenzo, he wished to be seated beside him for the dinner conversation. Furthermore, Archbishop Salviati wanted to discuss Church matters with Giuliano, who he knew was well versed in such things. Of course, what the Medici matriarch did not understand was that Francesco was positioning the two assassins—each of whom would be carrying arsenic—next to her beloved sons and their wine goblets.

But Madonna Lucrezia stunned Francesco by advising him that Giuliano would not be attending the banquet the following evening.

“His leg is still quite sore, and further, he has now come down with an inflammation of the eye, which appears to be contagious as he has passed it on to little Piero. So it is best if he stays in bed for another few days, I think.”

Francesco de Pazzi tried not to let his panic show. This plot only worked if both Medici could be murdered on the same night.

“But ... ,” he spluttered, trying to think fast, “the young cardinal is anxious to meet him and will be so disappointed if he is not there.”

Lucrezia de' Medici smiled. Giuliano was so likeable and charming, it was natural that many would be disappointed if he were not in attendance. But, truth be told, he was a bit vain, and the inflammation of his eyes was something he did not want to show off at a banquet. She hoped to appease Francesco with her reply.

"The cardinal will have the opportunity to see Giuliano at High Mass. He would not like to miss the Easter service, given that he has much to be thankful for and wants nothing more than to celebrate the glorious resurrection of Our Lord. But he will return to the palazzo immediately afterward, no doubt exhausted and sore, as he has yet to be out of bed since his accident."

Francesco de Pazzi had stopped listening. Everything had changed yet again. There was now only one thing to be done; the path was clear. The Medici brothers would have to be assassinated in the cathedral during the Easter Mass the following morning.



"You are mad, I tell you. *Mad.*" Montesecco's bellowing shook the walls of the Pazzi palazzo. "I will have none of it. You have pushed me too far. I will not add sacrilege to my crimes under God. I will not murder a man—any man—during Mass. In a cathedral. On Easter Sunday. Do you not hear yourselves? Is there no decency left in any of you?"

Salviati wrinkled his rodent nose. "How dare you speak to us like that? We have no choice, and as it appears that God has forced our hand, we must assume that it is his will."

Jacopo de Pazzi was tired. He was too old for this, and none of it was to his taste anymore. "Montesecco is right. This goes too far."

Francesco de Pazzi was nearly hysterical. "You don't understand. This is our only chance! Montesecco, you said yourself that the troops from Imola and the surrounding regions of Romagna were on the march and will be at the walls of Florence tomorrow by the end of Mass. We must time this so that those troops can come to our defense immediately. You will cover Lorenzo in the basilica, and I will cover Giuliano."

Jacopo de Pazzi blinked hard at his nephew as if seeing him for the first time. "You? You are going to wield the dagger that kills Giuliano de' Medici?"

"Of course." Francesco said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I will be hailed as a hero, as one of the men who was brave enough to

take on the Medici menace and free Florence of the tyrants.”

Oh dear God, Jacopo thought, shaking his head. *Francesco really is mad.*

And in that moment, each of the men involved in what would be known to history as the Pazzi Conspiracy was forced to make a decision. For Francesco de Pazzi and Archbishop Salviati, both blinded by greed, envy, and unbridled ambition, there was only one course of action. They were determined, even excited, about killing the Medici brothers on Easter. And while Salviati would not be wielding any daggers, he had his own role. He would be the one, when given the signal from the cathedral, to march into the Signoria and seize the government. He would be aided by a co-conspirator whose duty was to give the signal to let the troops into the city, while marching with the archbishop to demand control of the Signoria. They would be accompanied by mercenaries from Montesecco’s troops, all of whom would be prepared to kill any member of the council who tried to stop them. This was a revolution. This was war. People would die. It was the way of the world.

But for Gian Battista da Montesecco, the plot had irrevocably dissolved into sacrilege and insanity. He had been searching for a way to remove himself from it. Even before meeting the old man in the tavern, he knew he was on the wrong side. He did not want to kill Lorenzo de’ Medici. His would not be the hand that ended so noble a life. In fact, it crossed his mind at that moment to kill Francesco de’ Pazzi and Archbishop Salviati instead, ensuring the safety of the Medici brothers for a while longer. Later he would have much cause to wish he had acted on that particular instinct.

“I’m out.” Montesecco looked at the other three men in disgust. “Jacopo, I think you are beyond this too, but you are a man and must make your own choice. As for the two of you”—he spat on the ground as he prepared to take his leave—“you will be good company for each other in hell. Give the Devil my best, and tell him I will not be too far behind you.”

And before anyone could object, Montesecco was out the door and out of Florence. He didn’t look back as his horse carried him as fast as he could ride back to Romagna.



Jacopo Bracciolini had fallen from grace.

He had once been Lorenzo de’ Medici’s partner in Hermeticism and heresy when they were younger, but he had grown into a handsome, self-indulgent,

and completely corrupt man. He was tormented by his own insecurities and eaten away by envy over the glory of Lorenzo de' Medici's golden life as the most respected and desired man in Florence. The younger Bracciolini had all of his father's mental acuity but none of his nobility; he was a cerebral genius, but the dangerous kind—a man completely disconnected from his heart. While he was capable of extraordinary feats of intellect, he had no desire to use his mind for anything that wasn't immediately amusing or entertaining for him. He had stolen from his father to save himself from his gambling debts, had sold off his mother's jewelry and pilfered his sisters' dowries to protect himself from the trouble he was constantly embroiled in. Giving himself the title Florence's Ultimate Hedonist, he hosted wild, underground orgies where he indulged the darkest elements of the city in nights of unruly—and often unthinkable—pleasures. There was nothing he wouldn't try, no risk he wouldn't take, and he was fond of saying that he experienced all the deadly sins on a daily basis. So when he was first approached by Francesco de Pazzi to participate in the coup d'état to overthrow the government of Florence, he was delighted by the prospect.

“What's in it for me?” had been his first question, had always been his first question in any circumstances. Francesco de Pazzi initially offered Bracciolini a ridiculous sum of money to gain his attention. He then rattled off a number of additional incentives that he knew would appeal to the heathen hedonist: a country house, Circassian slave girls—virgins, of course—and various treasures to appeal to his vanity.

But Bracciolini, while an outrageous narcissist, was not entirely stupid. He had asked the key question.

“Why me? I am not skilled in war and politics. I am a scholar by trade and a hedonist by practice. The only time I ever held a sword was in one of Lorenzo's tournaments, and that was for show. Why do you want me to lead this rebellion with you?”

“The Order of the Holy Sepulcher,” Francesco de Pazzi said, looking his prey square in the eye.

Bracciolini had stopped smiling then. God, how he hated the Order, and everyone involved with it. The mere mention of it made his stomach turn.

“I see. And as Lorenzo is the Poet Prince, the golden boy of the sanctimonious Order, you know I have no qualms about seeing him dead,” Bracciolini guessed. He didn't mention what was foremost in his mind at that moment: nothing would make him happier than to see that little bitch they all called Colombina throw herself into the Arno in grief over Lorenzo's murder. That alone was worth more to him than all the money he was being promised.

Francesco nodded. “Yes, I know. But there’s more. And there are far greater riches in your future than you can dream of should you choose to help us. The pope himself is asking for your assistance.”

Ah, now we were getting somewhere. To be on the payroll of the pope was to ensure that the future was paved with gold.

“What does he want from me?”

“Intelligence. He wants you to come to Rome and tell him everything you know about the Order and about the Medici as its leaders. He wants any relics or documents that your father may have kept pertaining to the Order, and any book or paper given to your father by Cosimo.”

Bracciolini’s father, Poggio, had been Cosimo de’ Medici’s closest friend and ally. He had been instrumental in the Order. In fact, the Bracciolini family had been connected to the Order of the Holy Sepulcher for many generations, and Jacopo had been raised in their sacred traditions. He had even spent some time in the presence of the Master with Lorenzo when they were children. But he was always different, never quite able to focus on or grasp the lessons of love and community that were the central elements of the Libro Rosso. It didn’t help that he was constantly compared to Lorenzo and Sandro, who were stellar pupils and devoted initiates. Bracciolini was jealous of Lorenzo’s position and Sandro’s talent, neither of which he had in equal measure. He had once wanted to be a painter, but his time in the workshops proved that he was best suited for crushing minerals to mix pigments.

When Lucrezia Donati—known only in the Order as Colombina—had come into the fold and joined the Order at the age of sixteen, something snapped in Bracciolini’s already twisted mind. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He could actually believe the Order’s teachings about the divinity of women when he looked upon Colombina. But his adoration was short-lived when it became obvious that she belonged to Lorenzo. Here was yet another great privilege that Lorenzo possessed that was out of Bracciolini’s reach. His envy, and his hatred, simmered. Bracciolini went to the Donati home and informed Colombina’s father that the merchant Medici intended to make his treasured, noble-born daughter into his lowly mistress, if he hadn’t ruined her in that way already. His informing had been the reason the Donati had forbidden Lorenzo to have further contact with their daughter. Later, Bracciolini would also be the informer who brought the news of Colombina and Lorenzo to Niccolò Ardinghelli’s doorstep. Repeatedly. His information, which included cruel goading with invented graphic details, had led to Colombina’s beating at the hands of her enraged husband.

One night after getting very drunk, he waited outside the Antica Torre for Colombina. She was the new princess of the Order, their precious Expected One, the Master's golden student. But he knew what she really was. She was Lorenzo's whore. And Lorenzo was in Milan on a diplomatic mission for his father at the time, so it seemed logical to Bracciolini that Colombina would be in need of a stand-in while Lorenzo was away. He grabbed her as she passed the little alley that separated the Antica Torre from Santa Trinità and put his hand over her mouth before she could scream. She bit him, drawing blood. And she wasn't finished yet. Sweet, fine-boned Colombina, it turned out, was a fighter. She pulled the brooch out of her mantle and stuck him with it hard, the pin digging deep into his flesh. Bracciolini screamed, loud enough to bring a member of the Gianfigliazza family out of the tower and to Colombina's rescue.

Bracciolini threatened her, blackmailed her, came up with every foul idea he could invent to shut her up, but to no avail. Colombina, the voice of truth, demanded that he pay for his attack upon her and refused to allow him to turn it on her and somehow make it her fault. She would not be the victim of his lies, nor would she allow him to go free and do this to another woman. He had not only disgraced the good name of Bracciolini, he had violated every possible rule of the Order. And for his kindly, devoted father, this was the greatest crime imaginable. Jacopo was ostracized from his family and disinherited as a result.

Every second of pain Jacopo Bracciolini had ever experienced in his life had come from Lorenzo de' Medici, his little whore, and their blessed Order.

And now he considered his good fortune for a moment. Was it possible? Was he actually being offered to be paid handsomely to destroy Lorenzo and the Order?

"What are the pope's intentions?" he asked de Pazzi. "Is he going to declare them heretics?"

How delicious that would be. Maybe he would burn Lorenzo at the stake like that crazy French bitch they always yammered on about. Maybe Lorenzo's whore would burn too, and he would get to watch. Perhaps he would recommend this to the pope. Certainly he would emphasize the hated Colombina's role as both heretic and adulteress while informing His Holiness of the crimes committed against the Church regularly by the Order.

"It is not for me to say what the Holy Father does with the information," de Pazzi answered. "But I would assume that it is his greatest desire to eliminate heresy in all its forms."

"As it is mine, Francesco. So consider me your partner, and tell the pope

that if he will prepare appropriately comfortable accommodations for my arrival, I will deliver all the evidence he desires. And perhaps far more than he even expects!”



Jacopo Bracciolini paid an unexpected visit to the Palazzo Medici on Via Larga shortly after his secret meeting with Francesco de Pazzi.

While Lorenzo was aware of the younger Bracciolini’s roguish reputation and would never forget what he had done to Colombina, he agreed to see his childhood friend privately in his *studiolo* for the sake of the old family connections. However, he wondered how long it would be into the conversation before Bracciolini asked to borrow money from him.

“Lorenzo, my old friend.” Bracciolini embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks before continuing. “I have come to make amends for the events of the past. It has been many years since I treated your Colombina in that unforgivable manner. I would apologize to her myself, as the events of that night haunt me all these years later, but I know that she would not hear it from me. I was hoping you might tell her how sorry I am. I assure you, I am a changed man.”

Lorenzo nodded graciously. The apology seemed sincere enough. He would not judge it yet but rather see where this meeting was headed. He remained silent and let Bracciolini talk.

“I know you are wondering why I am here. I bet you are even waiting for me to ask for a loan from you. Well, you are incorrect if that is what you think. I have come asking for nothing but your forgiveness. And to present you with a gift.”

Bracciolini removed a beautifully bound book from his satchel and presented it to Lorenzo with ceremony.

“*The History of Florence*, as written by my father, Poggio Bracciolini. As you know, he wrote it in Latin. But inspired by your love of the Tuscan language, I have translated the entire book into our vernacular. I have been working on it for years. And I have dedicated this Tuscan version to you, for encouraging our language and because you are now as much a part of the history of Florence as your grandfather.”

Lorenzo was stunned. The last thing he had expected from this now notorious member of the Florentine nobility was a gift of this magnitude. Lorenzo paged through the beautiful book, which was a masterwork of translation and history. Perhaps there was real hope for Bracciolini yet. He

was still capable of extraordinary feats of academia, despite his increasing dissipation, and he was gracious enough to add passages about Lorenzo's accomplishments to the text.

Lorenzo thanked him and brought out several bottles of his best wine. The two men drank into the night, talking about the good times when they were younger. Lorenzo relaxed as they discussed Plato and their early days with Ficino and laughed about some of their antics as boys. He was so convinced that Bracciolini was sincerely trying to change his life that he even brought his childhood friend up to date on the Order and their plans for the future.

Despite his years as a leader immersed in the dangers of Florentine politics, Lorenzo always wanted to find the best in people. He was not naturally skeptical, and he believed in giving every man a chance to atone for his past and redeem himself through his future. The trait was part of his spiritual education, but it was also essential to his character. It was how he was made. That Lorenzo was so noble and forgiving was what made him great. It was also what made him vulnerable.



Jacopo Bracciolini kept his word to the Pazzi conspirators, providing Sixtus IV with more evidence than he could have ever imagined for Lorenzo's heresy. He had strategized his visit to Lorenzo perfectly and knew him well enough to be certain he would fall for the book. It had gone exactly to plan, and Lorenzo had spilled all kinds of secrets when he let his guard down. Everything Bracciolini knew about the Order he verified in that evening's conversation. He embellished a bit when sending the report to Pope Sixtus, just to make it that much more valuable. Then he demanded double the original payment as reward for such perfect evidence of heresy against the Medici and their supporters. His money was paid in pieces of silver as a little joke from the Curia.

Bracciolini was firmly committed to storming the Signoria with Salviati, the archbishop of Pisa, during the assassination. It would be a dramatic piece of theater, and one he would enjoy playing a leading role in. He almost hoped there would be resistance so he could kill a member of the council as part of the spectacle. He had never plunged a sword into a man; it was a new and exciting experience he was looking forward to.

With Bracciolini firmly committed to the plan, Francesco de Pazzi now needed to find a few more assassins. Losing Montesecco was an enormous blow, but it was not insurmountable. He consulted with Archbishop Salviati, who came up with a solution. It was imperfect, perhaps, but a solution

nonetheless. The archbishop had found two priests who were willing—even excited—to kill Lorenzo de' Medici. The first was Antonio Maffei. He was a scrappy little man from Volterra, a Florentine possession that had endured a civil war. The bloody uprising there had left more than half the population dead. Maffei had lost his own mother and sisters to the marauders who came into Volterra. The marauders were paid mercenaries, brought in by the Medici family to quell the rioting there when the Florentine army was spread too thin on other frontiers. While it was not Lorenzo's fault that the mercenaries turned out to be brigands and criminals, their devastation of Volterra was often blamed on him. Lorenzo visited Volterra on many occasions, offering personal restitution to the people there following the bloodshed. He spent a fortune of his own money to restore the town and its remaining citizens. And his guilt haunted him; Lorenzo had nightmares about Volterra regularly. It was the greatest regret of his political career.

But for the young priest Antonio Maffei, Lorenzo de' Medici was a villain of the highest order. If he could play a part in the death of such a man, he would be a hero for Volterra. He agreed to wield the dagger for no compensation other than pardon from the pope once the deed had been accomplished.

Maffei would be joined by another priest, a man who was deeply in debt to the Pazzi family bank and looking for a way to clear his ledger. Stefano da Bagnone agreed to assist Maffei in the event that it took more than one man to take down Lorenzo. As Easter Mass was a formal state occasion, it was to be expected that Lorenzo would be dressed for it. Full formal attire in Florence included a sword. And Lorenzo, the accomplished athlete and sportsman, did not wear a sword simply as an ornament. He knew how to use it. Therefore the plan was for the two priests to take him from behind, before he was able to unsheathe his weapon.

Together with the archbishop, the two priests came upon a brilliant plan to ensure their success. The signal to attack the Medici brothers would come during Mass, when the host was raised up on the altar in preparation for Holy Communion. Not only was it a signal that could not be missed, marked as it was by the ringing of bells, but devout Florentines would all be looking down in their prayers at that moment. It would give the assassins time to strike from behind without being immediately witnessed. Two daggers in Lorenzo's throat in that instant would guarantee the success of their venture.

That there were now two priests and an archbishop in the service of the pope planning the bloody murder of two brothers on Easter Sunday—to be accomplished as the holy host was raised on the altar of a basilica—never bothered the conscience of any of the conspirators.

Nor did it strike anyone involved as the least bit ironic that the only man to make the determination that such a plot was utterly diabolical, the only man to walk away from what he determined was absolute evil, was the professional killer.

Palazzo Medici, Florence
April 25, 1478

LORENZO'S SMILE was broad as Giuliano limped into his *studiolo*.

"It lives! It walks!" Lorenzo got up from his desk and bounded over to his brother, embracing him in a bear hug. "How do you feel?"

"Much better. Sore. Getting downstairs was hard. It will require more healing before I feel like myself again, but I am on the mend overall."

Giuliano stopped talking for a moment and Lorenzo saw that his eyes, still red with the inflammation, were also unnaturally bright. Concerned now, he put his hand against his brother's forehead. "Do you have a fever? Do your eyes hurt from this inflammation?"

Giuliano laughed, brushing his brother's hand away as he moved to sit on the red upholstered settee that had once rested beneath Botticelli's masterpiece, *The Time Returns*. "No, no. I'm fine. That is what I am here to tell you, brother. I have just come from the chapel, where I prayed before the Libro Rosso for the last hour as you advised me to do. I listened to the angels, and they have spoken to me. They tell me to marry Fioretta, to choose only love. To acknowledge and raise my child as my own."

Lorenzo could feel the lump building in his throat as he listened. It took him a moment to speak. "I am so happy to hear you say this. And I believe that you have heard the angels correctly. What else would angels say, other than that love conquers all?"

"But you have not heard the best of it yet! You will not believe it, but it is a miracle. Mother ... she does not object! She was waiting for me when I was finished in the chapel, and she told me that she had been searching her heart and wanted only my happiness. Can you believe it? I shall marry Fioretta!"

Lorenzo embraced his little brother and hugged him tightly. For a moment, they were children again. Innocent, happy, playing out their roles of protective older brother and sweet, indulged baby. There were tears in Lorenzo's eyes as he pulled away from Giuliano.

"I am ... so happy for you both. I can only imagine how Fioretta will feel when you tell her."

"I have decided to propose to her tomorrow, if my eyes are better. It will

be her Easter surprise. I shall ride up to Fiesole first thing in the morning and surprise her. And my son.”

“You aren’t going to the High Mass tomorrow? The young cardinal is coming, and he is the pope’s nephew. He has asked to see you there specifically, as you will not be at the banquet tomorrow night.”

Giuliano considered for a moment. “Perhaps I will, and then go to Fiesole afterward. It depends on how I feel. I’m not sure how my leg will feel after walking to the cathedral and back; it may be too sore for me to ride. But now I must go and apply the compresses to my eyes that the doctor has given me so that I may celebrate the most blessed Easter of my life!”

Florence
Easter Sunday 1478

THE CATHEDRAL BEGAN to fill hours early, as Florentines arrived to get a seat for the High Mass on Easter Sunday. Seats were always saved in the front pews for the ruling elite, of which the Medici were the highest in rank. Lorenzo’s space was reserved at the front right, facing the altar. He would attend today with his closest friends and his brother, rather than his family, as the Mass here in the center of Florence was something of a state occasion. His mother, wife, and children would attend a separate service at their “home” basilica of San Lorenzo.

Francesco de Pazzi watched Lorenzo enter the cathedral with Angelo Poliziano. He looked around for Giuliano and began to panic when he didn’t see the tall, unmistakable form of the younger Medici brother. De Pazzi approached Lorenzo, who advised him that Giuliano was feeling very sore today and had decided that the walk to the cathedral wasn’t in the best interest of his ailing leg.

Sprinting the long blocks from the cathedral and down the Via Larga to the Medici palace, Francesco de Pazzi was admitted by Madonna Lucrezia, who was preparing to leave for her own local service with her grandchildren. De Pazzi told her breathlessly that the young Cardinal Riario was asking for Giuliano and that there was still time for him to attend the Mass so as not to offend the family of the pope. Lucrezia allowed the man in to speak with Giuliano about it directly. Her son was a grown man and perfectly capable of making his own decisions.

Francesco de Pazzi knew the character of Giuliano de’ Medici well. Everyone in Florence did. He was known for the sweetness of his nature and his unfailing manners. De Pazzi preyed upon this quality, pushing Giuliano hard.

“The cardinal is the youngest of powerful brothers, at seventeen. He is certain that you would give him invaluable advice about filling such grand shoes and living up to an exalted family name. And I have no doubt that the pope would feel far more kindly disposed toward Lorenzo in the future if you would grant his favorite nephew this small audience. Just a few minutes following the Mass, and we will have you back in bed in no time.”

Giuliano sighed. In truth, his leg was feeling much better today and he was capable of walking to the cathedral, albeit with a limp. But he had hoped to get up to Fiesole early, as he was so excited to be with Fioretta and the baby. But if what Francesco was asserting here was true, if the pope’s nephew really wanted to spend some time with him, then he should go to the Mass. It would benefit Lorenzo, above all, to have an ally within the pope’s family. And it wouldn’t delay him so very much, really. And after all, he did have much to be grateful for, and therefore an hour on his knees in honor of the Lord’s resurrection was the least he could do. He had actually been feeling rather guilty about skipping the service. Perhaps God sent Francesco de Pazzi to ensure that Giuliano went to church today!

Further, Giuliano remembered as he dressed that today was April twenty-sixth. It was two years ago to the day that their lovely Simonetta passed away. What was it that Lorenzo had said? “April twenty-sixth will always be a day of sadness for us”? He would go to Mass today to pray for the soul of Simonetta as well, and for the Cattaneo and Vespucci families, who still mourned her.

He dressed quickly and was a little surprised when Francesco hugged him tight around his waist as he emerged from his chambers, exclaiming his joy that the younger Medici was feeling well enough to accompany him on this fine day. What the unsuspecting Giuliano could not have known was that Francesco was checking for weapons and for armor. But because he had dressed so quickly and did not want any extra weight on his recovering body, Giuliano had decided to forgo the formal attire and leave the military dress items at home. Lorenzo would be wearing them, no doubt magnificently, and he would represent the family, as he always did.

Giuliano limped down the Via Larga toward the magnificent basilica, the pink and green marble facade gleaming in the sunlight. The masterpiece of the red brick Duomo was an inviting sight, welcoming all Florentines in to worship on this holy day.

They entered through the cathedral, but it was getting late and the spaces around Lorenzo had already filled. Giuliano would need to sit elsewhere, further back in the cathedral. His brother spotted him and raised an eyebrow to question his presence at the Mass, to which Giuliano just shrugged and

pointed to de Pazzi. Lorenzo smiled at him and waved as if to say “explain it later” and turned back to prepare to take his seat. He adjusted his sword and scabbard so that they would lie across his lap during the Mass and not knock against the pews. As he did so, Lorenzo noticed that there were two priests sitting behind him. He didn’t recognize them, but he smiled politely and wished them a blessed Easter before turning back in readiness for the service. He commented to Angelo that the pope’s nephew, the most recent Cardinal Riario, looked very young and very nervous from his place on the altar. No doubt he had never experienced High Mass in such an enormous place as their beautiful cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiori.

Giuliano followed Francesco de Pazzi back toward the northern side of the cathedral, near the choir, and sat beside him. He was trying hard to focus on the service, but in truth all he could think about was seeing Fioretta. When the sacristy bell rang to signal the arrival of the host, he bent his head in reverence, as did the majority of the congregation.

Giuliano de’ Medici, about to begin a prayer in honor of the Lord he loved so much, never saw the dagger coming. Francesco de Pazzi struck hard with the power of adrenaline, plunging the first blow into the younger Medici’s neck with such force that it split him open.

Bloodlust seized Francesco de Pazzi, and he continued to stab Giuliano de’ Medici as hard and as fast as he could, grunting with the effort of it. He was so frenzied in his attack that he sliced open his own thigh, mistaking it for Giuliano during one blow.

There was chaos in the cathedral now, screaming as the blood splattered the congregation on the north side, and people began to scatter. Simultaneously, the two priests in place behind Lorenzo had attacked, but the priest-turned-assassin Antonio Maffei had made a tactical error. As he pulled his dagger from the sleeve of his robe with one hand, he steadied himself for the first blow by grabbing Lorenzo with his other.

Lorenzo de’ Medici had lightning-fast reflexes, well honed from years of hunting and athletics. He jumped the moment he was touched from behind, causing Maffei’s blow to land with less force. While the dagger sliced into Lorenzo’s neck, it was not a fatal wound. The intended victim was able to unsheath his sword and defend himself before the other assailant could get a blow in.

For Angelo Poliziano, this was the moment of his life when everything he had ever been or ever would be was crystallized. His father, the most significant source of love and wisdom in his life, had been stabbed to death before his eyes when he was a little boy. Now Lorenzo de’ Medici, the most

significant source of love and wisdom in his life twenty years later, was similarly threatened by knife-wielding assassins. But this time Angelo would intervene.

He wasn't a big man, and his years as a poet had not given him an athletic build or any physical strength to speak of, but Angelo Poliziano had something else—determination. He hit one of the assassins with the heel of his right hand, hard enough to knock him off balance, and then seized Lorenzo by his free arm to pull him back and out of harm's way. The two priests, stunned and terrified by the quick reactions of both Angelo and Lorenzo, turned and ran out of the cathedral before anyone could stop them.

“Come on!” Angelo yelled over the chaos at Lorenzo, who was now bleeding profusely from his neck wound and was in no condition to do anything but obey. Lorenzo's party pulled him immediately through the huge bronze sacristy doors, slamming them shut against any further attacks. Lorenzo was momentarily stunned, but then the true terror hit him and he began to scream for his brother.

“Did you see Giuliano?” he asked Angelo desperately. But Lorenzo's friends had no answer for him. His little brother had been sitting behind them and to the left, too far to see what was happening in the madness of the attacks and the haste to protect il Magnifico. Until that moment, it hadn't even occurred to the others that Giuliano would be a target. Who, really, would want to assassinate the nonpolitical, sweet-natured Giuliano? It made no sense. Lorenzo's loyal entourage was focused only on their leader at that moment. His young friend Antonio Ridolfi sucked the wound on his neck. If the assailants had been truly skilled, their daggers would have been poisoned. Ridolfi would gladly take the poison if it meant saving the Magnificent One. One day, perhaps, Florence would be grateful for his sacrifice.

“Giuliano!” Lorenzo was weak now from blood loss and Angelo was trying to keep him still while wrapping his throat with his own cape. “Is he safe?” Lorenzo was frantic. He had to know about his brother.

Another longtime Medici companion, Sigismondo Stufa, jumped up on a ladder and climbed into the choir loft to get a better look at the chaos that had transformed Easter Sunday into a bloodbath. Someone screamed that the dome was caving in, and people were now being trampled in the effort to escape the basilica. It took Sigismondo a long minute of searching to set his eyes upon the terrible sight that he would remember in his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Giuliano de' Medici, nearly unrecognizable in a mass of his own blood, lay lifeless in the northern corridor. He had been torn to pieces, stabbed with

the most vicious blows nineteen times.

There was no time to mourn. No one knew who or how many the attackers were. They must get Lorenzo to safety. And if Lorenzo knew that Giuliano had been massacred on the cathedral floor, they would never get him out of there. Sigismondo said that he had not seen Giuliano from the choir loft, giving Lorenzo false hope that his brother had escaped. The lie broke Sigismondo's heart, but it was the only way he could ensure that Lorenzo would leave the basilica and get back to the safety of the Palazzo Medici as quickly as they could carry him.

Later Sigismondo would claim that he hadn't lied when he said he didn't see Giuliano in the cathedral. In the terror of the moment, he could hardly fathom that the terrible mass of flesh and blood on the floor was his childhood best friend and jousting partner. That mess was not Giuliano de' Medici. How could it possibly be?



The second element of the Pazzi conspiracy launched as Archbishop Salviati and Bracciolini marched toward the Signoria in preparation for their coup. They were joined by a team of ruthless mercenaries from Perugia. The approach of this ragtag bunch of soldiers raised the hackles of the Signoria, despite the fact that they were led by an archbishop. The current *gonfaloniere*, the commander in chief of the republic, was a hard and fearless man named Cesare Petrucci. Petrucci was having lunch when the archbishop and his brigade arrived and demanded audience. The savvy Petrucci allowed them in but separated Archbishop Salviati and Bracciolini from the band of villainous Perugians, requesting that this "honor guard" wait in an adjoining room. What the archbishop didn't realize was that the room where the mercenaries were asked to wait was a cleverly disguised holding cell. There was no way to exit that room once inside unless a member of the Signoria released them.

Archbishop Salviati advised Petrucci that he had a message from the pope. He began to deliver a somewhat nonsensical speech about liberating Florence, but his nerves got the better of him and he stumbled over the words. But Petrucci had heard enough. Words like "overthrow" and "tyrant" were all he needed to hear to know that there was trouble brewing. Besides, there was commotion in the square and he could already hear chaos in the streets outside. He shouted for the Signoria guards and, as he did so, was attacked suddenly by an erratic Bracciolini, who was awkward and late pulling his sword.

Petrucci, a burly man and a skilled warrior, didn't bother with a weapon.

He grabbed Bracciolini by the hair and wrestled him to the ground in a matter of seconds. Guards from the Signoria piled in the room and further subdued him, at the same time getting a few good kicks in at the archbishop of Pisa, who was also taken into custody.

“Toll the *vacca*!” Petrucci shouted.

The *vacca* was the enormous bell in the Signoria tower, given that name, the “cow,” because of the odd and deep mooing sound the bell made when rung. It was a sound of grave importance to Florentines. The *vacca* was only tolled when there was a crisis in the city. It was a call to order, and it brought the citizens of the republic rushing into the Piazza Signoria to discover its purpose.

As the *vacca* tolled its lowing sound, riders wearing the livery of the Pazzi family charged into the square, shouting, “Liberty! Death to the Medici tyrants! For the people of Florence! For the people!”

If the Pazzi conspirators were hoping that the citizens of Florence would chime in with them, they were to be sorely—and dangerously—disappointed. The word of Giuliano de’ Medici’s terrible murder at the hands of Francesco de Pazzi was spreading wildly, causing outrage throughout the city. As more Pazzi shills rode into the square, shouting for liberty, the populace of Florence poured into the square, shouting in return, “*Palle! Palle, Palle!* For the love of the Medici!” The Pazzi horsemen were pelted with rocks as the crowd became progressively more unruly. Details of Giuliano’s murder continued to spread and were exaggerated.

“He was cut into a hundred pieces! He was scattered all across the altar! His eyes were torn out and his nose cut off by the Pazzi scum!”

The terrible butchering of sweet Giuliano de’ Medici would not go unpunished in Florence this day. The palace guards had already killed the Perugian mercenaries and were hacking off their heads to place on spikes as a warning to all who would threaten the peace in this civilized republic. The first official conspirator to see retribution was the stunned Bracciolini. This was not how he had anticipated his involvement in the coup d’état to end Lorenzo’s life and the Medici reign. He began to talk fast, to promise complete intelligence on all the conspirators if they would spare him. Petrucci listened for less than a minute before he was interrupted with the news of Giuliano de’ Medici’s murder on the altar at High Mass. He spit on Bracciolini and nodded to the palace guards.

“Make an example of him. And make it count.”

Within seconds, the guards had found a sturdy rope and tied one end of it

around the transom beam across the window. The other end went quickly around Bracciolini's neck. They hurled him out the window, not even bothering to watch as he smashed against the side of the Palazzo Vecchio, breaking his neck and his teeth all in one motion. He was left to dangle out the window as the first example. But he was only the first.

They grabbed the archbishop of Pisa next. He was screaming and kicking and invoking papal protection until one of the guards broke his jaw to shut him up. The guards sent him to join Bracciolini, in precisely the same way. He did not die as quickly, and the gruesome details of his slow and agonizing death would be recorded later by Angelo Poliziano. As the archbishop swung violently from the rope and smashed into the cold body of Jacopo Braccioloini, his last living act was to sink his teeth into the dead man's flesh. Why he did it was a mystery, and a macabre one that was speculated upon by Florentines for years. Most speculated that the archbishop somehow believed he could save himself with this final, gruesome act. If that was his plan, it failed as had his others.

The mob was now screaming for Pazzi blood, and there was a surge toward their palazzo. Francesco de Pazzi was in hiding there, but not very effectively. The wound in his thigh was bleeding profusely, and it was easy enough to follow the blood and find him where he was hiding under a bed. The mob stripped him naked and dragged him through the streets, turning him over to the Signoria so that he would join his companions in their instant execution. Like those who preceded him, Francesco de Pazzi was left to dangle out the window of the Signoria from an impromptu but effective noose.

As the mob ruled and rumors spread, the people of Florence demanded to know if their magnificent Lorenzo was still alive. Hundreds of people now marched in the streets, on their way to the Palazzo Medici, chanting, "Magnifico! Magnifico!" The crowds swelled, with more shouting, more demands for proof that Lorenzo was alive.

Inside the Medici home, immediate plans were being made to get Clarice and the children out of Florence to one of the villas as quickly and quietly as possible. Lorenzo did not want his family in the city for the chaos that would clearly continue until the truth was known about this terrible day and its origins. He was praying that his mother would consent to leave with them, and yet he knew she would not. Lucrezia was in shock, unable to speak since hearing the news that her baby, Giuliano, had been brutally slain.

Lorenzo's personal physician, having been rushed in through a back door of the palazzo, examined the neck wound carefully.

“You are truly beloved of God, Lorenzo,” the doctor said, shaking his head. “There is no way you should have survived a direct stab wound to the neck. But look at this.”

The doctor held out the piece of silver chain he had cut away from the wound. Still attached to it, albeit covered in blood, was the necklace with the relic of the True Cross that Lorenzo had been given as a child. It had been held for him until he was old enough to appreciate it, a priceless gift from King René d’Anjou, which had once belonged to Joan of Arc.

“It looks as if the knife cut the chain, but that as a result, the blow was deflected and hit further up your neck, above the artery. This pendant quite possibly saved your life.”



Florence was in chaos. There was rioting and mayhem as the citizens reacted to the conflicting rumors swirling through the charged Tuscan air. Hundreds were surrounding the palazzo at Via Larga, demanding to know if Lorenzo was dead or alive.

Angelo became liaison between the street and the palazzo, reporting to the people of Florence that Lorenzo was in the care of the doctor and asking that they continue to pray fervently for Lorenzo’s survival. But as the afternoon progressed and the crowds swelled, there was no appeasing them. They wanted Lorenzo. They demanded Lorenzo.

As the doctor wrapped Lorenzo’s neck, Colombina and Fra Francesco were admitted into the room. Colombina fell to her knees at Lorenzo’s feet when she saw him, grabbing his hand and weeping.

“Oh, Lorenzo, thank God. Thank God you are alive.”

He stroked her hair and wept as he asked, “Do you know about Giuliano?”

She nodded but could say nothing, too overwhelmed by her grief over Giuliano’s death and relief over Lorenzo’s salvation.

Lorenzo’s next question was for his Master. “How do I reconcile all of this, Master, through the teachings of the Order? Where was God today, when my brother went to worship, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and to give thanks for his life? Why was my beautiful, innocent brother taken?”

Fra Francesco, who had seen more tragedy and violence than any single soul should ever have to witness, placed his hand gently on Lorenzo’s shoulder. “My son, I can only say this: it is easy to have faith on a day when all is well. It is very hard to have faith on a day when we are surrounded by

tragedy. I cannot tell you why God did not save Giuliano, but it is clear that there was divine intervention to save you. And so rather than cursing God for what he did not do, I prefer to give thanks for what he did do. I am grateful that Madonna Lucrezia is not mourning both her sons on this day. And so is most of Florence, by the sound of it.”

Lorenzo nodded. He whispered, “I am grateful for my life, Master. But ... it will take some time for me to apply the teachings of love toward the men who did this.”

“But that is exactly what you must do, Lorenzo, and you must do it now. It has taken over fourteen hundred years for men with a purpose to unravel the true teachings of Jesus and to destroy the Way of Love. You will not be able to restore them all on your own in your lifetime. But what you can do now is set an example for your people and the future by giving them a message of peace.”

Colombina clenched his hand and looked up at him. “The people of this city are terrified that something has happened to you, and it is mob rule out there now. Innocent Florentines are getting hurt, and in the current climate, there may even be more slaughter. But they love you, Lorenzo, and they will follow your lead. Talk to them and they will listen.”

Lorenzo nodded. His first attempt to stand up was unsuccessful. He was dizzy from blood loss and shock. The three in the room—Colombina, the Master, and the doctor—helped him to try again and held him up while he gained his balance. Angelo came in panting, announcing that the mob was more restless and uncontrollable than ever. He had told them that Lorenzo would deliver a statement through him, and he had come to craft one.

“I will deliver it myself, Angelo. But you may have to repeat it for me if I cannot be heard over the din.”



“Look, Lorenzo lives!”

The swelling mob outside the palazzo had been waiting for more information from Angelo when the window on the second story, just left of the main door, opened and Lorenzo appeared. His neck was dramatically bandaged and his clothes were caked in blood; his face was white with shock. Even from a distance it was clear that il Magnifico had been gravely injured in the attack. There was a collective intake of breath as the crowd watched Lorenzo struggle to remain on his feet and deliver his message. Angelo was

visible beside him. What the mob below could not see was that Colombina and the doctor were propping him up from behind so he would not fall.

“My brother and sister citizens.” Lorenzo summoned all of his strength to be heard, as the people of Florence hushed each other in an effort to listen. “A terrible crime has been committed this day. An affront to God, a scar upon our republic, and a crime against my family. As some of you may know, my brother Giuliano ... is dead. He was ... murdered in the cathedral during Mass on this, of all holy days.”

The crowd erupted with the official announcement of Giuliano de' Medici's murder. Lorenzo, who was failing fast, continued with only the slightest pause, forcing the crowd to silence itself in order to hear him.

“But we are a civilized people. As such, we must not add to the crimes that have been committed on this terrible day. We, the Republic of Florence, are viewed by citizens all across Europe as leaders of a progressive and independent state, one known for its culture, learning, and most of all, its law. And as such we must continue to set an example by allowing a just system of law and order to take effect and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.”

There was more screaming at the word “justice,” before Lorenzo continued. “Let me stress that we cannot take this justice into the streets, no matter how much we may feel the need to right these wrongs. It is not the way in which a civilized republic operates. Our freedom comes from our commitment to justice. So let us remain free by also remaining just.

“While my family appreciates your outpouring of love and loyalty more than I have words to express, we must also beg that you do not commit acts of renegade retribution in an attempt to prove that loyalty. Those of you who knew my brother know that he was a kind and gentle man. He detested violence and would never want to see bloodshed carried out in his name.

“Most of all, I ask that in this time of terrible trial, you stay together as a community. Take care of each other. Cherish each precious moment that you have with your family ...”

Lorenzo was choking up now, the reality of losing Giuliano setting in as he spoke. He had to cut it short. “That really is the only message that matters now. Love one another. And thank you. Thank you all for your loyalty and support.”

The crowd gasped as Lorenzo collapsed against Angelo. He was carried to his bed as the citizens of Florence cheered him, chanting “Il Magnifico” and “*Palle, palle, palle*” through the streets. The sympathy toward Lorenzo and his family had never been greater. Pope Sixtus and his closest family and followers were reviled as the criminals they were. The citizens of the Florentine Republic would stand with Lorenzo on virtually every decision he would make. Traditional councils were abolished or simply became obsolete as a council of ten Medici supporters was convened as an emergency measure during the tumultuous period immediately following the cathedral massacre. That council, never meant to be anything but temporary, became the ruling force in a city that took its mandate from the Medici.

For the next ten years, Florence belonged exclusively to Lorenzo as he became the most powerful man in Europe to never hold an official title.



In one of the many strange twists of fate in the history of the Medici family, Fioretta Gorini died of fever and blood loss in her bed on the same morning that Giuliano was murdered in the cathedral. Blessedly, she never knew about the massacre. Fioretta’s last communication from Giuliano was an excited message of love and hope, telling her that his family had consented to their union. She fell asleep shortly after receiving the correspondence, dreaming of the beautiful future she would have as Giuliano’s wife and the mother of Medici children. She never woke up from that dream.

Had Giuliano gone to Fiesole that morning, he would have arrived just in time to hold the hand of his beloved as she slipped away from him and returned to God.

Now they were together in heaven, taken on the same day.

Lorenzo de Medici adopted the baby, Giulio, with the permission and blessing of Fioretta’s family. For the rest of their days, the Gorini were treated as members of the Medici family and wanted for nothing. Baby Giulio was raised with Lorenzo’s favorite son, Giovanni, and the two boys became as close as twins. They played together, learned together, challenged each other. They finished each other’s sentences and spoke their own shorthand language. And like many sets of natural twins, they were opposite personality types: Giovanni was sunny and sweet where Giulio was serious and sullen. Although Lorenzo always treated Giulio with the same affection that he showered on his own children, the boy seemed to have an innate resentment for the world that had deprived him of his natural parents. It was often necessary for his half brother, whom

he called Gio, to cheer him out of his moods.

The destinies of these two boys were as intertwined as if they had shared a womb.



The Church is a hybrid monster.

For centuries, it has been the tradition in art to depict the Church in such a way, most often as a minotaur, the creature who lived in the center of the labyrinth in Crete and devoured the innocent. For that describes the Church, does it not? A mysterious type of hybrid monster, half horrible and half redeemable; half based on truth and half based on lies. A hybrid of love and hate, good and greed. This monster lives at the center of an impenetrable fortress and feeds on the blood of the innocent.

I have painted my hybrid monster as a centaur. He is a wretched one, and stupid, as he represents Sixtus and the brood of hideous inbred creatures who would carry out a plot to butcher the innocent on Easter Sunday. He clings hopelessly to his weapon, as he knows it has already failed him. He is caught. The truth is known.

The centaur is being controlled easily by the hand of the great Pallas Athene, who represents the goddess of eternal wisdom. It is in this way that I assert she will triumph, for she represents the truth. I have clothed her in a gown that is made up entirely of Medici devices, Lorenzo's interlocking wedding rings, while also draping her in laurel leaves. It is clear to any who have eyes to see that this wise and mighty goddess favors our Lorenzo. May it always be so. I create this painting as a talisman of protection for him and the entire Medici family.

I remain,

Alessandro di Filipepi, known as "Botticelli"

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*Florence
present day*

"POPE SIXTUS IV excommunicated Lorenzo shortly after murdering Giuliano in the cathedral."

Destino was giving the lesson to all who were assembled in Petra's living room that evening: Maureen and Peter, Roland and Tammy, and Petra.

"Excommunicated him for what reason?" Peter wanted to know.

"For surviving. Laugh, please, because it is ridiculous. But this is the truth.

Sixtus was so outraged that Lorenzo had dared to survive his attempt to murder him that he excommunicated Lorenzo for the act of survival. And when the citizens of Florence would not acknowledge the act of anathema against il Magnifico, Sixtus excommunicated the entire Republic of Florence.”

“What?” This was said in a unison of disbelief.

Peter, the former priest who had once worked inside the Vatican, added, “You cannot excommunicate an entire city! And certainly not because of one citizen in that city!”

“Yes, I know it is absurd, but everything that pope did was rather unbelievable. And he always got away with it. Papal authority being what it was, and the pope being infallible, he could do whatever he wished, and so he did. You can understand why Lorenzo became more and more fixated on the elimination of absolute papal authority while at the same time he was always seeking ways to destabilize the structure of the Catholic Church.”

“What happened?” Roland asked. “Did the citizens of Florence accept their excommunication?”

“Of course not. For Florentines, Sixtus was a criminal and therefore nothing he said or did held much weight with the average citizen. The council in the Signoria sent a letter back to the pope, telling him that they would much rather follow Lorenzo than him, thank you very much. It was the ultimate affront! I wish I could have seen the face of Sixtus when he was faced with that letter.”

“The story of Giuliano and Fioretta is so sad,” Tammy said. “And yet, there is something poetic about their dying on the same day.”

“They were twinned souls, of course,” Petra said. “They left this world together, and I have no doubt that they were instantly reunited in heaven, to become as one again.”

Peter had been analyzing the material from the Libro Rosso on this idea of each soul having a twin. It fascinated him, confused him, and most of all, it disconcerted him.

“So are you saying that all people have soul mates? In reading the legends of Solomon and Sheba in the Libro Rosso, I see reference repeatedly to one’s ‘own soul’s twin.’ Are all souls twin souls?”

Petra looked at him for a long and careful moment, a slight smile on her lips. When she answered, it was with a softness that they had not yet seen

from her. “Yes, Peter. All souls are twinned and perfectly mated. All of them. However, we do not incarnate together in every lifetime, depending on what the mission requires. Let us take Sandro Botticelli as a perfect example. Sandro was a singular character. He did not exist to find his soul mate, as he was singularly devoted to the mission. Sandro’s true love and authentic passion was creation, which is why he was so prolific. This was true for many of the greatest angelics: Donatello, Sandro, Michelangelo.

“Commitment to the love of another is a very specific task unto itself, and for some it is part of their mission—or even the mission itself. For others, it is a distraction. But the beauty of it all is that those who desire to find their soul mates do so because they have one to find. Those who have no interest do not because it isn’t their mission. Destino will tell you that Sandro was one of the most contented men he has ever known, and he was entirely alone. He liked it that way, because anything else interfered with his art.”

“So, I’m not entirely getting this. Sandro didn’t have a twin soul? I thought everyone did.” This was Peter, still trying to stay with the concept.

“Angels are not so easily understood, are they?” Destino asked. “But this is true about many of the angelic ones. Everyone does, and therefore Sandro did, indeed, have a twin soul. But such a person was not alive during the Renaissance, as it was necessary for him to channel that love and passion solely into his art.”

“But,” Petra continued with emphasis, “and this is critical to understand, he did not feel that terrible sense of longing that one feels when one is searching for someone. This is because his twin soul chose to remain in the angelic realms and help him from above. He tapped into the energy of his other half each time he worked, and his mate was right there with him. This is why his output was so extraordinary—because he was in essence working as two people, one above and one below, to accomplish the miracle of the one thing! And this is also why he felt such ecstasy while painting, which led to his unequalled output. He experienced no longing or loneliness. That particular pain happens only when soul mates are incarnate at the same time and unable to reunite; then there is an increased desire to find each other.”

Peter watched her with fascination. She was mesmerizing: brilliant, intense, completely aware of herself and her surroundings. He wondered as he watched her, *Is she one of these angelics? Is she so committed to her mission that she has not allowed herself to know committed, human love?*

Maureen was curious about this, thinking of various friends who were still alone and still unhappy. “So in other words, anyone who feels lonely is actually sensing that there is someone out there for them?”

“Precisely. God is all good all the time, Maureen. He would not allow us to incarnate in pain, feeling loneliness for a companion we can never find.”

Peter pointed to Roland and Tammy. “I can certainly believe that they were born to be together. But are they just fortunate? Are some more blessed than others? Am I to believe that everyone has the potential for their type of bliss?”

Petra took a deep breath and sat up very straight, preparing her answer. She was a natural teacher. Peter, who had been teaching for twenty years, recognized the gift in others.

“We are all meant to find our twin souls, just as we are all meant to achieve our highest destinies. But we don’t always do either, and the two are connected. Now, what I mean is this. It is useless to go out in deliberate search of your soul mate, because you will never find him or her in that way. There is only one way to find your twin soul, and that is to find yourself first.”

Petra continued the lesson. “I will tell you something about me personally. I have not experienced the blessing of divine love in this lifetime, and yet I have all faith that it awaits me. I know that by teaching the lessons of *hieros-gamos* and making it readily understandable for those who have found their beloveds, as well as those who have not, I create the path for my own soul’s twin to walk through the door. But had I stayed in the fashion industry, which was not my true calling, I likely would have remained alone or ended up with someone other than my truest mate.”

Peter considered this for a moment. It was all so new to him. Foreign, but also exciting. “Will you know him when you see him? Will it be love at first sight?”

“There is a veil over these things, Peter,” Destino answered the question. “Often one partner recognizes the other far earlier.”



As they were preparing to take their leave for the evening, Petra approached Tammy and asked, “May I place my hands on your abdomen? I want to see if I can feel the baby.”

“Sure,” Tammy said. “But it’s too early to feel anything yet.”

“It isn’t if you’re Petra,” Destino said.

Petra leaned over and placed her hands gently on Tammy’s abdomen, closing her eyes. Moving palms very gently, she paused, breathed deeply, and

then moved again. She repeated this motion for another minute before opening her eyes. She shook her head slightly, as if to clear it and return to the here and now.

Smiling warmly at Tammy, she said simply, “*Serafina*.”

“Serafina?”

Petra nodded. “It is a girl. Did you know?”

Tammy shook her head and looked at Roland excitedly.

“I told you it was a girl!” he said.

“It is. A golden one. An angelic. She is of the seraphim, the shining angels who surround the throne of our mother and father in heaven. The word *seraphim* means ‘fiery one,’ which if you study your Libro Rosso, you will recognize as the original name of the Queen of Sheba. Makeda, the fiery one. For she was one of the seraphim come to life on earth, to change the world with the twin of her soul. Just as this child will do.”

“Are you telling me that my baby is the reincarnation of the Queen of Sheba?”

Petra laughed. “Something like that. A similar energy, anyway. In Italian, a female angel of this order is called a *serafina* and is a very blessed thing.”

“Serafina ...” Tammy smiled back at Petra as her hands moved to her belly, and she burst into tears of joy.



As Petra escorted the others out, she stopped Peter at the door.

“For the others, this conversation about soul mates is entertaining but not useful. They have found each other, after all! But for you, I think, it is far more important. If you would like to continue it, we should grab a bottle of wine.”

Peter laughed. “How can I say no to such an offer?”

“I was hoping you couldn’t,” Petra said.



Maureen entered the roof deck and inhaled the panoramic beauty of the Florence skyline, which surrounded her. She stopped short as she saw the figure standing at the far corner. His back was to her as he faced the Duomo,

but she did not need to see his face to know who he was. The warm breeze rustled his dark curls, and his broad shoulders under his shirt tapered into a perfectly formed back and waist.

“Hi.” It was all she could think of to say as she approached him from behind and ran her hand up his back.

“Good Lord!” he cried out with surprise, as he had not felt her coming up behind him. Maureen was confused at first as he drew back from her sharply. She looked at him and blinked, shaking her head for a moment. The man standing before her looked like a nearly identical copy of B  renger. But ...

“You’re not B  renger,” she said, embarrassed. “I’m sorry ...”

The man laughed now. “Don’t be. It has happened all my life. I’m Alexander Sinclair, B  renger’s brother. You must be Maureen.”

Maureen was still in shock. “You could be twins.”

“B  renger is two years older, but we have always been mistaken for each other. We used to play that game as kids until B  renger realized that he got the worst end of the deal, as I was the one who was always getting into trouble.”

“Does he know you’re here?”

“He does now,” said a similar voice, as B  renger walked out onto the terrace.



“The charges were trumped up, totally fabricated,” Alexander explained to his brother. Maureen had left them to speak privately on the roof deck after Alex’s surprise appearance. B  renger was dying to speak with her, but the appearance of his brother was completely unexpected. Exhausted, Maureen went to bed with the promise to have breakfast with him in the morning. She needed to try to get some sleep before making critical decisions about her future.

“It is clear that they won’t stick, which is why they released me so quickly. I should never have been arrested, and they know that. Now we just need to determine who was responsible for creating that chaos. And who had the power to have me arrested.”

“And why.” B  renger was listening carefully, trying to put the pieces together. Alexander was the president of Sinclair Oil, but he was a far less controversial figure than B  renger. While Alex was powerful in industry and

society, he was not known for making enemies. And to arrest a leader in the British business world was no easy task; it required airtight evidence, which was clearly not present here.

“Do you have any idea of motive, Alex? There has to be someone who would want you out of the way, even temporarily. Who?”

Alexander looked down at his shoes for a moment, clearly embarrassed. “There is, which is why I came here. Not just to see you, but to clear things up with Vittoria.”

“Vittoria? I don’t understand.”

Alex squirmed a bit before blurting it out. “Vittoria and I slept together three years ago. In March, after a party in Milan. Bérenger, it was forty weeks to the day before Dante was born. And two months before she seduced you.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Dante is indeed a Sinclair but he isn’t your son. He’s my son. Vittoria was two months pregnant in Cannes, and I think she seduced you because she wanted to force you into marrying her and accepting Dante as your heir.”

“But you’re a Sinclair too.”

“Yes, but I’m not *Bérenger* Sinclair. You’re the glamorous man of mystery, not me. I’m the boring businessman. She has always been infatuated by you, and in fact I know that the only reason she wanted me was because I was a substitute for you. And of course, you are the esoteric heir, aren’t you? The Poet Prince.”

Bérenger sat back for a moment and allowed the reality of this to wash over him. If Dante wasn’t his, everything changed. The child was a Sinclair and a Poet Prince, but he was not the heir to a far more disturbing element of prophecy.

“But the baby ... he was premature. He could be mine in that case.”

“He wasn’t premature. He was underweight. Vittoria is a model. She starved herself and smoked when she was pregnant. Dante was small and ill when he was born, but he was full-term.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I’m not an idiot and I can add. I knew when Dante was born that he was mine, but Vittoria wouldn’t return my calls and never has. And I think she is the reason I was arrested.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

Alexander explained patiently. “I was arrested the day she announced that you were Dante’s father. Vittoria knew that I would call you immediately and tell you the truth, so she had to create a scenario that would immediately remove me from her game. I have no doubt that her family pulled some strings to make that happen. They’re capable of it.”

Bérenger nodded his agreement. “But they didn’t anticipate your getting out this quickly. Certainly not before tomorrow after two o’clock.” Bérenger thought of the fate that awaited him in the Red Room of the Palazzo di Signoria and shuddered.

“Clearly. So I came here because I knew you were here, and therefore it was also likely Vittoria was as well. Have you seen her?”

“No,” Bérenger replied. “She has barraged me with requests to meet, but I have put her off. I wanted a few days to consider my strategy. But I have an appointment to see her tonight.”

“Where?”

“She has an apartment just down the street, off the Via Tornabuoni.”

Alexander smiled at him conspiratorially. “Do you mind if I keep that appointment in your place?”

“Not at all. But what is it that you plan to do?”

Alexander hesitated for a moment. “I know this is crazy after all that has transpired, but I am going to ask her to marry me.”

“What? Have you lost your mind? That woman is poisonous. Deadly.”

Alexander shook his head. “No, Bérenger, I don’t believe that, even after what she has done to me. I think she is lost, and I think she has been brainwashed by her parents and is in her own way a victim of this secret society madness that we all know so well.”

Alexander did not share Bérenger’s passion or commitment to their heretical family heritage. He never had. Alex had watched as Bérenger was spirited away to France every summer of their childhood for “training” that he neither understood nor received himself. Bérenger was the golden child, the Poet Prince, and Alex was just a normal little boy. And while he had never blamed his brother for his lesser treatment, it had left an indelible impression upon him.

“Vittoria is also the mother of my son. I want to be in his life, and the best way to do that, to ensure he has the education and upbringing that is best for

him, is to marry Vittoria. I want to protect him from the madness and provide him with a normal life. And, as sick as this may sound, I am completely besotted with her. Always have been. I could do worse than to marry the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Bérenger spent the better part of the next hour attempting to talk Alexander out of this idea, but it was useless. He was snared in Vittoria’s web and could not be saved. How many times had he watched otherwise brilliant men lose their wits over a woman’s physical beauty? And he understood here that there were other elements in play for Alexander. Perhaps Bérenger had never entirely understood the depth of his brother’s jealousy. This was a way for Alex to get something back on the bloodline side of the family. His son was now the prince with the bluest blood in Europe. Marrying Vittoria and raising Dante, while nightmarish for Bérenger, was a dream come true for Alexander.

Bérenger gave Alex the address and the scheduled time for the rendezvous. Alexander would go in his place, at eleven p.m., and surprise Vittoria.

Bérenger Sinclair hugged his brother and wished him luck. But as Alexander left him, he could not help thinking that this was a very bad idea.



Maureen had a headache and was exhausted from days of sleeplessness and turmoil. She was too restless to truly rest, sleeping in small bursts and waking often. She was also a vivid dreamer and always had been. Many of Maureen’s dreams were prophetic and had led to amazing discoveries in her life, so there was a blessing to be found within this curse of restless sleep.

It looked like tonight was going to be no exception.

“Oh!” Maureen squealed and sat up in bed. She ran her hands over her face and looked for the clock. It was 10:50 p.m. She had been in bed for an hour. Her cell phone was on the nightstand next to her, and she grabbed it and hit the speed dial for Bérenger.

He answered the phone on the first ring, clearly excited that she was phoning him. But there was no time for lengthy discussion.

“Nightmare. Bérenger, something is wrong and it involves Vittoria.”

“Why? What did you see?”

“Fire. An explosion of some kind. I thought it was you at first; I saw him from behind. But he turned and I knew it was Alexander there

with her.”

“And you think it is happening now? Here? In Florence?”

The dream had had an intensity to it, an urgency, that Maureen had never experienced before. “Yes. Call them. Now. We have to warn him. And Vittoria. Do you have her number?”

Bérenger said yes and immediately dialed Alex. He was hopeful when the phone rang, but after four rings it went to voice mail. He sent a text message to Alex, hoping that would get to him more quickly. It was often difficult to get cell phone reception behind the heavy stone walls of ancient European buildings, which the Palazzo Tornabuoni happened to be.

He tried Vittoria next. She was notoriously hard to reach, as she only turned her phone on if she wanted to call someone and never, ever answered. He dialed her number, but the phone went immediately to her bilingual voice mail.

“Dante,” Bérenger said suddenly, realizing that the boy would be in danger as well.

He speed-dialed Maureen. “I’m going down there. It’s just a few blocks down the street. I have to get to them.” He never doubted Maureen or her visions. Believing in her was as natural to him as the instinct to save his brother and his nephew. And Maureen didn’t know about Alex and Vittoria yet, which made her dream that much more chilling in its accuracy.

He was out the door before hanging up.



Bérenger Sinclair passed the chic shops, then crossed at the old church with the enormous Medici crest as he ran down the Via Tornabuoni. The old palazzo, which had once been the home of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s mother, was now being converted into very expensive apartments. The construction was still under way, and only a handful of the posh dwellings were completed. Vittoria Buondelmonti was one of the first to buy in the complex, as an investment for the future. She rarely stayed there because the construction noise was so annoying, but was still more convenient and private than dealing with hotels. Vittoria lived for the paparazzi, but she also liked to control them. There were times, particularly with Dante, when she wanted to escape her celebrity and become less visible. She had told Bérenger this as she described the building and gave him directions to the hidden entrance off the street, which was why he knew exactly where to turn as he passed the first sets of construction scaffolding.

He didn't get any closer. The ball of fire exploded into the night sky, illuminating Florence in a gaseous yellow glow as debris rained down upon Bérenger Sinclair.

Florence
1486

LORENZO WAS IN the library in Careggi, working through a particularly tricky sonnet when Clarice entered. He sighed, hoping it wasn't too audible, and removed his spectacles. He could see by his wife's face that this was going to be a struggle.

Clarice spoke to him in her formal Roman manner, which she rarely shed even after seventeen years of marriage and seven living children.

"Lorenzo, do you agree that I am a dutiful wife and devoted mother to our children?"

He knew it was a trap of some sort, so he cut right to the chase. "Of course, Clarice. What is this about?"

"Let me finish, Lorenzo. It is not what you think."

Lorenzo said nothing and allowed her to continue.

"No, I have long learned to live with the constant specter of Lucrezia in our bedroom. She is a wound that will never quite heal and yet bleeds no longer. You know, I cannot even hate her. She loves you. What woman does not? But I have not come here to speak of her ..."

Clarice was hesitating now, which made Lorenzo a little edgy. What could be so dangerous that she was clearly unwilling to broach the subject with him? He was too tired to be patient. "Then what is it about?"

Clarice took in her breath sharply, then blurted, "Angelo."

Lorenzo thought he had heard her incorrectly. "Angelo? *My* Angelo?"

His incredulity seemed to feed her resolve. "Yes, and he may be *your* Angelo, and so be it. I cannot determine whom you call your friends. But I can and will determine who educates my children and lives in my home. I will not have that man filling my children with any more of his heretical ideas. Today, our little Maddalena advised me that she was named after the wife of Jesus."

Lorenzo shrugged. "She was."

"She was not. She was named for my mother, who was a pious and noble woman of impeccable Roman blood. And my mother was named for a saint,

Maria Maddalena, the penitent saint and redeemed sinner, as she is recognized by the Holy Church.”

“Why this, Clarice? Why now?”

“Because I will not have that taught to my children. If you want to play with your secret missions and your heresies, I cannot stop you. But I will not allow my children to be a part of it any longer.”

What was left of Lorenzo’s patience snapped. “Unless there is something you have been hiding from me, I believe they are also my children.”

“Lorenzo! How dare you.” She was stunned momentarily at the insult. Lorenzo was rarely cruel, but she sometimes tried his patience beyond bearing.

“My children—our children—will not be subjected to blasphemy.”

“It’s not blasphemy. The definition of blasphemy is taking the Lord’s name in vain. What it is, is heresy. If you’re going to accuse me of something, at least get the charge right.”

“I will not have that man teaching any more heresy to the boys. Giovanni is destined for the Church!”

“Yes, he is. But which Church, Clarice? Yours? Or mine?”

“I’m serious about this. I will have Angelo out of our house.”

“You go too far, my dear.”

“No, I have not gone nearly far enough. Lorenzo, do you not think that I fear for you as well? Do you not know that I pray for your immortal soul, pray that you will not go to hell?”

Lorenzo sighed, a deep and anguished sound.

“You’re too late, Clarice. I am already in hell.”



The battle between Clarice de’ Medici and Angelo Poliziano raged on. It was fueled by Lorenzo’s eldest son, Piero, who had no love for his teacher. Angelo was impatient with him and pushed him in his studies. Piero was indulged by his mother and lazy; he had little interest in applying himself, so he complained to his mother about real and imagined insults to worm out of working with Angelo.

Lorenzo, fed up with Clarice’s nagging, found a compromise. He moved Angelo to another villa, where Clarice rarely visited, and freed Piero from

further instruction at his hands. Angelo was relieved, as having any responsibility for Piero's education was a dodgy business. And while Lorenzo was aware of the shortcomings of his eldest, Piero was still the Medici heir. Angelo could only be partially forthcoming with Lorenzo about the boy's utter uselessness.

But Lorenzo would not have to intervene between the two for very long. Clarice de' Medici became ill early the next year, deteriorating rapidly into weakness, and then coughing up blood. She died quite suddenly at the age of thirty-four. Lorenzo was away at the western edge of Tuscany when she passed away, and he remained away during her funeral. Still, in spite of the sadness of their years together, he indicated in his journal that he was distraught over her death. For all that she lacked as a wife and companion to him, she was a devoted mother to his children. He grieved for her loss as a result and felt no small degree of guilt for his own hand in giving her a life that was not as happy as it could have been.

Lorenzo moved Angelo back into Careggi to focus on the education of Giovanni and his half brother Giulio. Now, with literally the greatest teachers in the world—Angelo, Ficino, and the Master—available to them, they were receiving exactly the education Lorenzo wanted for them. And the “twins,” as Lorenzo referred to them, were not alone. He had adopted another thirteen-year-old boy, a special angelic whom he and the Order had been watching from birth. Michelangelo Buonarroti had grown into the most extraordinary talent anyone had ever seen at such an early age, and it was determined that he must be raised as a Medici.

Michelangelo joined Lorenzo's family hesitantly. He was painfully shy, but the boisterous brood welcomed him and he quickly learned to fit in. The older girls adored him and waited on him, and the younger ones annoyed him with requests to sketch horses and flowers. When they sat down for meals, Michelangelo was placed at Lorenzo's right. He was treated as a son from the moment he walked through the door.

“He is an astonishing student,” Angelo informed Lorenzo. “In everything. Ficino is working with him on Hebrew and the study of the Old Testament, and he is thriving. His language skills are strong and he can retain almost verbatim stories told to him once. And the Master is over the moon about Michelangelo's spiritual understanding. Says he was born with innate knowing of all these teachings. He knew them coming in. It is as if he truly is the incarnation of the Archangel Michael.”

“Maybe he is,” Lorenzo said. He wasn't kidding.



Michelangelo was in the garden sketching when Lorenzo came to find him. He stood back, watching for a moment, as the boy held up a small statue. It was the statue of what appeared to be a saint, about a foot tall and very old. He held it to the light, turned it, then put it down and sketched. He held it again, looking very closely at the face, then resumed his sketching.

“Who is your muse, my boy?” Lorenzo asked him, pointing at the statue.

Michelangelo looked surprised to see him. “Good morning, Magnifico. The statue is of Saint Modesta. It is the treasure of my family, as it belonged to the grand contessa, Matilda of Tuscany.”

Lorenzo was impressed. “May I see it?”

“Of course.”

Lorenzo picked up the little statue and examined it. He understood why Michelangelo was so fixated on the face. It was beautiful. The features were delicate and sweet; they conveyed a wisdom and yet also a sadness.

“What is it you are sketching?”

“A pietà. It is our assignment from Verrocchio. Only I wished to create one that is not traditional but rather celebrates the teachings of the Order. See ...”

Michelangelo showed Lorenzo the drawing. His beautiful Mary, whom he sketched with the sweet face of Modesta, sat with Jesus draped over her lap in a classic pietà style. But there was something different about this piece. An elegance and a sadness that Lorenzo had never seen before.

“Stunning, my son. And her face is perfection. Yet ... she is quite young to be the mother of Jesus, is she not?”

“She is, Magnifico. But that is because she is not the mother Mary. She is Mary Magdalene. I have created a pietà that represents our Queen of Compassion in mourning for her lost love. Her pain is our pain; it is the pain of love when it suffers separation, the way that most humans feel it on earth. I would capture that feeling through this new way to interpret the story. Someday I would like to sculpt this in stone and make it come to life completely.”

There was a light in his eyes when he spoke. Such an inspiration would have been extraordinary in an adult with a lifetime of education and experience, but coming from the lips of a thirteen-year-old boy, it was completely unexpected. And utterly divine.

Lorenzo's reply was simple. "Thank you, Michelangelo. Thank you."

*Florence
present day*

THE NIGHT AIR was particularly silky as the moonlight bounced off the red tiles of the Duomo. Petra and Peter sipped the Brunello as they continued their discussion.

"Are you still a priest, Peter?"

Surprised at the direct question, Peter hesitated, then put his glass down. "Hmm. I paused because I have yet to actually say this aloud, to myself or anyone else. But no. I'm not a priest. I no longer believe in any of the things that I originally took vows for. And while I am a more devoted Christian than I have ever been, I am not a Catholic any longer. At least, not a blind one. I have many questions for my own Church."

"And when you were a priest, did you ever question your vocation?"

"You mean did I feel lonely? Like I was missing out by not having a relationship? If I am truly honest, yes. I did. But I refused to think about it and simply chalked it up to the doubt of the devil talking."

"Were you ever tempted?"

"No." Peter shook his head. It was not as if he hadn't had countless opportunities. He had. Peter was a very handsome man with his "black Irish" looks: dark hair and deep blue eyes. He was the priest the female students always fought over. If you had to take Latin or Greek, at least you could sit in Father Peter's class. "I just never considered it. I have a lot of self-discipline, and when I commit to something, I commit all the way."

"Commendable and rare," Petra said. "But now that you are no longer a priest ..."

"Am I tempted?" His question was soft, pointed.

As was her answer. "Yes."

He nodded, looking at her over his wineglass. "You already know the answer."

Her huge brown eyes were suddenly very bright. "I ... knew before you arrived, and it was confirmed when you walked through the door. We were both teachers who were forced to leave our original occupations and find ourselves through the Way of Love. There were other clues." She laughed, a little with nervousness now, and a little with the wonder of life. "God has a sense of humor and he leaves such things for us, knowing we are so often

asleep. You are a linguist. You know that Petra is the female version of Peter. That ... I am the female version of you."

He smiled at her. "I do, and it already occurred to me. I have thought of nothing else since arriving in Florence. I've been quite tormented about it, to be honest."

She reached over and took his hand. "There is no need to rush anything, Peter. This is all new for you and I expect you to have doubts."

"Oh, but I don't." He stunned her with certitude. "None whatsoever. The Arques Gospel and the Book of Love have led me to understand that there is another way, and I know that it is the way that Jesus truly taught. And it is the Way of Love. That is the way of God, the reason we are here. And I need to continue to understand it so that I may teach in a new way, to a new world."

"I am happy to be your teacher. So that we may teach in this new way together, to what is becoming a new world."

"Then I am happy to be taught. But you will have to be patient with me. Not because I have reservations, but because I am inexperienced. I have no personal frame of reference for a relationship with a woman."

"Then I shall have to give you one," she said, moving closer to him now. "After all, I am the Mistress of the Hieros-Gamos."

But as Petra moved closer to begin Peter's instruction, the roof deck was illuminated by an explosion and a flash in the near distance.



The explosion at the Palazzo Tornabuoni Apartments rocked the city of Florence. It was a tragic accident, and the cause would be under investigation for some time. It appeared that a gas line had been cut during the construction earlier in the day, causing a leak. That the majority of apartments were not yet occupied was a blessing in this terrible tragedy.

Supermodel Vittoria Buondelmonti and a visiting friend, originally reported in the news to be Bérenger Sinclair, had been injured in the explosion. Later the reports would be amended to reveal that it was Alexander Sinclair, the president of Sinclair Oil, who was in critical condition at the hospital, along with Vittoria.

While Bérenger had been nearly buried by debris, he had been able to take shelter beneath the entry of the neighboring palazzo. He was treated for minor injuries and a concussion and then released into the waiting arms of Maureen.

In a strange little twist, the hospital in Florence where all the victims were treated was in Careggi. It was, in fact, the Medici villa where Cosimo and Lorenzo had lived such full lives, now renovated as one of Florence's hospitals.

There was one more twist that would reveal itself in the events of that night. The child, Dante Buondelmonti Sinclair, was not in the building at the time of the explosion. The construction noise had made him irritable, and a nanny had taken him to visit his grandparents at their villa in nearby Fiesole several hours before the tragedy.

*Careggi
April 1492*

THE DIMINUTIVE DOMINICAN friar Girolamo Savonarola was becoming increasingly problematic. He openly cursed Lorenzo from the pulpit now, calling the Medici tyrants and predicting their downfall at the hands of an angry God.

Savonarola had arrived two years earlier, when he had been invited to Florence by Lorenzo and installed most comfortably in the beautiful monastery of San Marco, which had been restored and decorated under the guidance of Cosimo Pater Patriae. When Lorenzo first made the decision to invite Savonarola, he knew it was a gamble. The monk was renowned for his heavy-handed preaching style as he raged against frivolity and corruption. He was troll-like and ugly, and yet charisma radiated from him when he opened his mouth. Even those who despised him and his message were often transfixed when Savonarola spoke, and they had trouble turning away.

Lorenzo had been convinced by his friends in the humanist movement to allow Savonarola to come to Florence for two reasons: the first was that the little monk saved his greatest ire for the corruption of the papacy; they had a common enemy. And while the current pope, since the death of the villain Sixtus, was an ally, there was still much reform needed in Rome. If Savonarola could be controlled, or at least influenced, he could become an effective tool in creating that reform. The second reason was precisely that Lorenzo was not a tyrant. He did not want it to be said outside Florence that he was excluding Savonarola because he was afraid of his message. By welcoming the controversial Dominican into his fold, he could keep a close eye on the message as well as the messenger, perhaps even exerting control over them both.

It is likely that Lorenzo de' Medici would have been successful in his management of the Savonarola problem had his body not been in a state of

rapid deterioration. He suffered with the gout that afflicted all Medici men and had killed both his father and grandfather. Lorenzo was only forty-three, and he hoped that if he was careful with his food and his treatments, he might live as long as Cosimo. Besides, he didn't dare die now. Piero was too much of a fool to run the Medici empire, and Giovanni—who had been made the youngest cardinal in history at the age of fourteen—was still too young to take over.

But Lorenzo had little energy or spirit left to deal with Savonarola, and as a result the friar's poisonous preaching continued unchecked—and escalated.

An angry and distressed Angelo returned from the Duomo, where Savonarola had had a packed crowd earlier that morning. “He must be stopped, Lorenzo. He is playing prophet now. And while you and I both know that he is inventing prophecies which we know he can fulfill, the average citizen in Florence doesn't realize that. If Savonarola says tomorrow will come, his idiotic followers will all stand up and cheer the sun tomorrow and say, ‘Fra Girolamo was right! Tomorrow did come!’ ”

Lorenzo was in bed, exhausted. He had been out at Montecatini taking the waters, as they seemed to help his gout in some small way. But the ride back across Tuscany was almost too painful to make it worth it.

“Let him rage, Angelo. I do not care.”

“You need to care. He is predicting your death.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And soon. He is saying that God is striking you down and that suddenly you will take a terrible turn and die immediately.”

“Well, I do not intend to die, Angelo. So we shall prove Savonarola a liar once and for all.”

“I hope so, Magnifico. I hope so.”



Lorenzo's condition worsened. Like Cosimo, his pain became so acute upon standing that he was confined to his bed. But he was definitely not dying. Of this he and his physicians were certain. Still, they tried every possible cure for gout, including a bizarre mixture of ground-up pearls and pig dung, boiled into spiced wine. It was so vile that Lorenzo insisted he would rather have the gout.

During these bedridden days and nights at Careggi, Lorenzo was

entertained by those he loved most. Angelo and Ficino read to him; Giovanni and Giulio practiced their Greek and Latin together. The girls showered him with love. Michelangelo would come and simply sit, content to be with the man who was more like a father to him than anything else. Sometimes he would sketch; at other times he would ask questions about life, art, or the Order. He was easy and welcome company for Lorenzo, who referred to him as “my son.”

Colombina came as often as she was able, visiting both Lorenzo and the Master at the same time. She would kiss Lorenzo on the forehead and sing to him and sometimes merely hold his hand while he slept. All the while she was praying as hard as she knew how for God to heal the prince so that they might continue their mission together, and that she might have the chance to love him for as many years as possible.

Sandro would come with new sketches for paintings, and his visits often cheered Lorenzo most of all. Sandro could still make his friend laugh harder than anyone else, and he did it effortlessly.

Sandro had returned to Florence one evening in early April with Colombina, leaving Lorenzo in the hands of his family and Angelo. For the rest of her life, Colombina would wonder what might have happened if she or Sandro had stayed. She knew one thing: neither of them would have allowed Savonarola into Lorenzo’s room without supervision.



In Angelo’s defense, it was a situation he could not have been prepared for. The little friar had arrived completely unannounced, and to open the door at Careggi and see Girolamo Savonarola was not something that anyone expected. The monk had traveled with three other friars from San Marco, one of whom was known by Angelo. In retrospect, this was likely part of the plan. Because Angelo had some familiarity with one of the brothers, he ushered them in quickly and submitted to their requests more readily than perhaps he should have.

“I wish to see Lorenzo,” Savonarola said simply in his raspy voice. In person and outside the drama of the pulpit, he was far less intimidating. He was small and slightly hunched. Angelo thought if he passed him on the street, he would feel sympathy for him or place money in his cup.

“Why?”

“Because I hear that he is dying.”

“He is not. He is ill, yes, but Cosimo lived many years in this state.

Lorenzo will too.”

“You dare to say you know the will of God?”

“You say it every Sunday in the Duomo.”

“I am God’s instrument. It is for me to do so. It is not for you, poet. But I am not here as your enemy, or as Lorenzo’s. I would show my lenience, and God’s, by offering him consolation in this time of darkness.”

Angelo considered this for a moment, as the friars accompanying Savonarola murmured their agreement that they were here only to provide comfort and offer a gesture of peace to the Medici patriarch.

“I believe he will want to see me,” Savonarola said. “Why don’t you ask him and see what he says.”

Angelo nodded. If Lorenzo was indeed awake, this was the best course of action. There was nothing wrong with il Magnifico’s mind, even though his body was failing him. And if he were feeling strong enough, he might find this encounter to be very interesting indeed.

Angelo found Lorenzo awake and restless when he entered the room. “What is happening, Angelo? I sense disorder in the house.”

“You could say that. You have a visitor. An unexpected visitor. Girolamo Savonarola.”

“Really?” Lorenzo began the painful process of sitting up in his bed. “Well, by all means send him in. I am anxious to show him I am not dying.

“Oh, and Angelo, bring us some wine, please. I cannot fail to be hospitable to my guest.”



“I need to be alone with him.” Savonarola was insistent. “What I need to discuss with Lorenzo is a private matter regarding his soul. It is not to be witnessed by anyone but God.”

Angelo led the little monk into Lorenzo’s bedchamber and closed the door behind him. If Lorenzo had any concerns about being alone with Savonarola, he didn’t show it.

There would be no witnesses to exactly what happened in the room that night, precisely as Savonarola had demanded. At least, no witnesses that anyone was aware of. Students of history would argue these events into the

next five hundred years, without benefit of one vital piece of information.

Thirteen-year-old Michelangelo, forever Lorenzo's angel, had been sketching quietly in the adjacent antechamber, separated only by a curtain. Nobody knew he was there.

He heard everything.



Girolamo Savonarola stormed out of the Medici villa in Careggi, signaling for his brothers to follow him quickly. He snapped over his shoulder at Angelo, "You'd best send for his doctor. And anyone else who needs to say good-bye. I told you he was dying. You were a fool to disbelieve me."

What no one saw as he rushed out the door to the waiting horses was the wine goblet he carried beneath his clothes, the one emblazoned with Lorenzo's symbol of the three interlocking wedding rings.

Lorenzo was having a convulsion. He was groaning in pain, shaking uncontrollably and unable to speak.

Michelangelo was already ahead of them. The doctor had taken up residence in Careggi, in chambers just down the hall from Lorenzo. The boy had waited, shaking, until that horrible man was safely out of the room; he ran down the hall to fetch the doctor.

The doctor sedated his patient to stop the convulsing and Lorenzo slept. His breathing was heavy, but even enough. Still, the prognosis was upsetting and shocking: it appeared that Lorenzo really was dying.

Angelo sent a messenger into the city to collect Colombina and Sandro. The message said, "Do not wait until sunrise." They did not want to make the same mistake they had with Simonetta, when nobody had the chance to say good-bye. Sadly, there was not enough time to summon the Master. He would not see Lorenzo alive again.



Lorenzo awoke, weak and exhausted, before the sunrise. He called his children in one at a time to speak to them, delivering messages to each about their future. He included Michelangelo in this, treating him always as one of his own flesh-and-blood children. Michelangelo would never speak about this day in public to anyone, except to say two things: Lorenzo de' Medici was my father above all else, and I will be haunted until I die by the voice of Girolamo Savonarola.

The “twins,” Giovanni and Giulio, Lorenzo addressed together. Their destinies were entwined, and it was fitting that they heard Lorenzo’s final instructions to them in unison. Together, the boys made a pledge to their father to carry out his wishes—without flinching and without fear—in the name of the Order. They weren’t born Medici for nothing.

The vows taken in that bedchamber would one day alter the course of the Western world.

Once the boys had said their good-byes, exiting the chamber in tears, Angelo, Sandro, and Colombina entered Lorenzo’s room together.

“You are the only three people in the world whom I trust. The only three who know everything. I need you all to take a vow, here and now, that our work will continue. I do not know if the mad monk poisoned me or not. I cannot prove it. But we did drink from those glasses there, so we can see ...” Lorenzo pointed to the table, and when he saw that there was only one goblet, he sank back in his bed.

Sandro slammed his hand on the table and Angelo just looked sick. He would forever blame himself for allowing this to happen.

“I will oppose him to the death, Lorenzo,” Sandro hissed.

Lorenzo nodded. “Just be wise about it, my brother.” He smiled weakly. “Be the Medici that I have made you.”

Colombina had no more interest in talking of Savonarola or revenge. It was clear to her that Lorenzo was dying, and she wanted only to spend his last minutes with him in peace and confessing her eternal love. But before Sandro and Angelo left them, they all joined hands and said the prayer of the Order together.

*We honor God while praying for a time
when these teachings will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.*

“Promise me, my most beloveds. Promise me that we will all be together again when God chooses and the time returns. Meet me here, on this beautiful earth, that we may finish what we started. It is a promise we all made in heaven, so long ago, and it is a promise we must keep on earth for the future. On earth as it is in heaven. Promise.”

“I promise,” each said in unison. Sandro and Angelo kissed Lorenzo on both cheeks, tears flowing from all three men, as they took their leave.

“You are still the most magnificent woman who ever lived, Colombina,” he whispered to her. “I have loved you from the very first day that my eyes rested on your beauty. And now as I die, I love you more than ever, and with God as my witness, I will love you through eternity, you and only you. *Dès le début du temps, jusqu’à la fin du temps.*”

She grasped his hands. Once so strong, there was little strength in them now, just enough to clasp hers gently. Colombina lowered her head, mouth beside his, so that their breath came together as one. She whispered the translation, “From the beginning of time, to the end of time.”

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers and began to weep. “Oh, Lorenzo, please do not leave me. Have we been wrong about God? For how can he be a God of love, when he has kept us apart for so long and now he would take you from me completely?”

“No, no, my Colombina.” He used the little strength he had left to stroke her hair. “This is not the time to lose our faith. Faith is all we have, and we must cling to it. I do not profess to understand the trials that God has put us through, but I have faith that there is a reason for them. Perhaps it was a test, to see how strong our love could be through all things. To see if our love had the endurance of our Lord and his own beloved.”

She stroked his sallow face and let the tears flow. “Then I believe we have passed his test, my Lorenzo.”

“It is better this way, my dove.”

Colombina was exhausted and agonized beyond understanding. “Don’t say so, Lorenzo. I will never see that losing you will be anything but torment for all of us.”

“But it is.” He seemed to find a surge of strength in these final words. “In our mortal lifetimes, God has seen fit—for whatever his reasons—to keep us apart. But once I have passed from the restrictions of this world, I am quite sure that God will allow me to be with you always. You see, Colombina, we will never be apart again. Isn’t that so much better?”

She couldn’t speak through her tears, as he continued. “I would extract the greatest promise from you, Colombina. Promise me that when the time returns, no matter where or when, that you will find me and never give up on me. Just like this time ... you never gave up, and I gave you so many reasons to do so.”

“No, my sweet prince. There is never a reason to give up on love. Not the kind of love that we share. It is deeper than any of the challenges that we will ever face, in any life or any time. It is eternal, it is

from God.”

“You are my soul. You must promise me, Colombina. I have to know that someday, somewhere, I will hold you again.”

“Oh, my Lorenzo, my beloved,” she whispered with soft determination, “I will love you again. I will.” Her tears blended with his.

He was now too weak to reply, but his eyes told her everything. Very tenderly, she kissed him for the last time. It was the final moment of merging their souls through their shared breath, that he might take a part of her with him, and that she might keep a piece of him with her.

He would hold her in that way until they would be together once again in the spirit or in the flesh, however God would decree it.



Colombina walked quietly from Lorenzo’s chamber as the sun was rising in Florence. Angelo and Sandro were sitting outside the door, looking drawn and anxious. Opening her mouth to speak, she choked on the sob that shook her body and hurried from the house. She didn’t have a destination, she was just running blindly to get away from the place where Lorenzo had died. She found herself in the loggia, and there she attempted to steady herself on a great stone pillar, but there was no stone strong enough to hold her grief. She sank to the ground and let the agony of her sorrow overtake her as the first sob broke through in an unearthly scream.

Her cries were heard throughout the valley. Pitiful and heart-wrenching wails, filled with decades of pain and lost love, they echoed through the forest of Careggi where she and Lorenzo had first met as children all those years ago.

It was Sandro who came to console her finally, after giving her some time alone.

“Sandro, what shall we do? How will any of us live without him? How will Florence?”

“We will live to fulfill his vision, Colombina. As we promised.”

“But how will any of us find the strength? Without our shepherd, we are lost sheep.”

Sandro looked at her, not without sympathy, and yet his reply to her was forceful as he got to his knees to hold her by both shoulders. “Listen to me. I

have painted you many times, and each time for a reason. As Fortitude, because your strength of purpose is unlike that of any other woman I have ever met. I have painted you as the Goddess of Love, not only because Lorenzo desired it, but because your love for him embodies all that Venus should mean to us. I painted you as Judith, because you are fearless and will flinch at no task that is given to you in the name of what you believe. And I have painted you as our Madonna, many times, in celebration of your grace. You have been a brilliant muse, little dove, precisely because you bear all those qualities. And now you must call upon all of them—your strength, your love, your faith, and your fearlessness. You must do it for yourself, for Lorenzo, and for the work we have promised to complete.”

Colombina reached up to brush the omnipresent shock of golden hair out of Sandro’s eyes. “You are the best brother anyone could ask for, Allesandro.”

“*Le temps revient*, sister. Come on, Judith. There is a giant out there who needs decapitating, and you are just the girl to do it.”



In the early hours of April 9, 1492, as Lorenzo de Medici was extracting promises from his loved ones on his deathbed, a series of unexplainable events occurred in the city of Florence. An intense electrical storm hit, and lightning struck Giotto’s Campanile, causing chunks of stone and marble to fly from the tower and land in the center of Florence. In the midst of this melee, the two male lions who symbolized the emblem of Florence, and who had lived peacefully together beside the Piazza della Signoria for years, began to roar and pace in their pen. They attacked each other and fought viciously. Both lions were dead by morning. So was Lorenzo de’ Medici.

The people of Florence saw these things as a terrible omen. Most were Medici supporters who feared the worst with Lorenzo gone. There was no leadership to fill his shoes, and the specter of Savonarola’s reign of terror loomed darkly over the city.

Girolamo Savonarola, for his part, manipulated the events of April ninth in another direction, and did so masterfully.

“God has spoken!” he roared the following Sunday. “He has struck down Lorenzo de’ Medici, the arch heretic and wicked tyrant. He has shown us his wrath and his disdain for the frivolities that Lorenzo indulged. God has shown us the evils inherent in art, in music, in any book that is not his own holy word. He has shown us with his lightning that he will take the entire Republic of Florence down, and he has killed the lions of this city as his first sacrifices. Do you wish to be his next sacrifice?”

The little friar roared his fire from the pulpit of the packed Duomo. The faithful in attendance, full of fear, roared in response, “No!”

“Did I not prophesy that Lorenzo would die before the seasons changed? Did I not tell you that God would no longer allow the Medici tyranny and blasphemy to continue?”

But Savonarola did not stop with fulfilling his own prophecy. He manufactured a tale of his final minutes with Lorenzo, telling of how the heretic refused to recant on his deathbed, despite Fra Girolamo’s unselfish trek out to Careggi to offer him the comfort of absolution. Lorenzo de’ Medici remained a heretic until he drew his last breath, and he died with the heavy stains of sin on his soul. The monk had no choice but to refuse to administer last rites, as the man was an unrepentant heretic until the end.

The message was clear: heresy leads to death. And the Medici were heretics.

*Florence
present day*

THE SUN WAS setting over the Arno, turning the rooftops of Florence into a burnished terra-cotta mosaic. Bérenger and Maureen sat hand in hand, enjoying the view, and each other.

“I had come here that afternoon to tell you that I would not marry Vittoria under any circumstances,” Bérenger explained. “Even if Dante was my son, even if Dante was the Second Coming as foretold in the prophecy. I had come to the realization—with some assistance from Destino—that the most noble action I could take would be to honor love. The best example I could provide for anyone would be to have the courage to stand up for the one thing that I know to be true in my life: my love for you.”

Maureen reached up to kiss him lightly, then said, “The time returns, but it doesn’t have to.”

“Precisely. It is time to break that cycle, Maureen, and that is what I realized. It is time for a new Renaissance, a golden age of the twenty-first century, a rebirth of the way we think and believe and respond. It is time to be reborn through love, and love alone. By shackling myself to Vittoria I would have been perpetuating the cycle of loss and turning my back on the most perfect gift that any of us can ever have. It would have served only to increase suffering, which as we know is not what God wants from any of us. It would have been a type of martyrdom.”

The realization of it hit Maureen hard. She understood in a new way exactly what it was that Destino had been trying to convey to so many of his students across so much time. They said the prayer of the Order in unison:

*We honor God while praying for a time
when these teachings will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.*



Felicity de Pazzi wrapped her hands tightly. The commemoration in honor of Savonarola's martyrdom had gone beautifully. The confraternity crowd had been even larger than that in Rome, and the stigmata had bled perfectly and on time. The bonfire, while small, was sufficiently dramatic to destroy the books that had been accumulated. Heresy and blasphemy burned bright in the flames, urged on by the gasoline, which Felicity poured on them from a canister.

She picked up the canister now and took it to her car. Her hands hurt, and she would need them for what she planned to do next. They just needed to stop bleeding so she could work with them. But there were a few hours left until it was fully dark. She had time. But not much.

*Florence
1497*

"SHE IS YOUR daughter, Girolamo, whether you wish to acknowledge her or not."

Fra Girolamo Savonarola could not stand the sight of the little guttersnipe, nor her whore of a mother. This foul wench, who stood in his cell in San Marco with a scrawny, underfed little girl, was an instrument of the devil. She had seduced him in a moment of weakness, and this dirty little thing was the spawn of that horrific mistake. Now this child was the one thing that threatened his future as the ruler of Florence's austere republic. She had to remain a secret at all costs. He had far too much to lose at this point.

In the five years since Lorenzo's death, Fra Girolamo Savonarola had successfully destroyed the Medici. It wasn't hard once Lorenzo was gone. His eldest son, Piero, was one step above an idiot. Unprepared to take over the Medici empire, he had systematically run it into the ground without much help, weakening what was left of the family and making it easy for Savonarola to insist on their exile. He had even been allowed to ransack the

Palazzo Medici in Via Larga to search out fuel for his bonfires, and fuel he found. Paintings, manuscripts, all aspects of heresy and foul paganism were confiscated from the palazzo and thrown onto one of the roaring bonfires that burned regularly in the Piazza della Signoria.

Savonarola had become famous for the bonfires, called bonfires of the vanities. His followers now numbered in the thousands. The people of Florence called them the Pignoni, which meant “the weepers,” if one was being kind, or “the snivelers,” if one was not. It was the job of the Pignoni to collect vanity items to burn in the bonfires. Anything that pertained to physical vanity—perfumes, creams, clothing of any adornment, jewelry—was meant for the fires. All musical instruments were as well, given that they were used only for secular celebrations and led to the gyrations of dancing followed by rutting. All books that were not Bibles or works of Church fathers were headed to the fires, with a special emphasis on the pagan classics.

But Savonarola held a special place in his heart for the destruction of art. It was art that the Medici had cultivated, art that contained the hidden clues to their heresies and their Order. By destroying as much art as possible, he would eliminate the teaching tools of blasphemy.

Within three years of eliminating Lorenzo, Savonarola had the Medici expelled from Florence, although the two he could not control, Giovanni and Giulio, were now cardinals in Rome. The current pope was a Borgia, and a Medici supporter, which was to be expected. The Borgias were the only family in Italy more corrupt than the Medici, from Savonarola’s perspective. So while Savonarola seethed that the Medici brothers thrived under Pope Alexander VI, at least they were far away from his Florence. By 1495 Savonarola was the undisputed ruler of the Florentine Republic. He created a new constitution and implemented new laws of morality and austerity. It was now illegal to walk through the streets wearing any kind of adornment. Vanity was the ultimate crime against God.

No one dared to oppose him, and his power grew. But the existence of this child was a problem, which had to be dealt with immediately.

“I have made arrangements for the ... child to be adopted into the de Pazzi family,” he said without looking at the whore of a mother overlong. The sight of her sickened him. The de Pazzi had been his allies in eliminating the Medici, and they were easy to manipulate. They owed him a lifetime of favors, and he had convinced them to take on this girl with no questions asked.

“For your troubles, I will give you one hundred florins to go away and never utter a word of this to anyone, nor are you to ever see this girl again once she becomes a Pazzi.”

The woman started to object, but Savonarola produced a sack with gold florins worth a king’s ransom.

“Do you concede to this agreement, woman?”

She nodded mutely, reaching out to grab the sack.

He dropped it to the floor and laughed as the coins scattered. The woman was forced to collect them on her hands and knees.

“Leave the girl in the foyer. I will have the brothers take her to the Pazzi.”

He left the room and never looked at the girl or her mother again. The little girl, her eyes huge with all that she had seen in too hard a life, stared ahead of her. Had Savonarola stayed to look at her, he might have noticed something disturbing about her, something in her eyes that held the earliest glint of madness.



Colombina was sweating with the effort but continued working with her fellow Pignoni. They were loading the items for the bonfire that had been collected during previous days onto the carts. The Pignoni had raided all across Tuscany in search of vanity items and heretical fuel for Savonarola’s bonfires. Every manuscript that Colombina prepared for burning made her stomach turn. Every piece of art she loaded onto the carts made her want to weep. But she could not show any emotion other than joy that these terrible offenses to God would see the flames.

It had taken Colombina and Sandro the better part of these last five years to become trusted members of the Pignoni. Savonarola did not trust either of them at first, but as they proved to be some of the most dedicated workers among his faithful, and were particularly involved with the bonfires, he became convinced of the sincerity of their conversion. Sandro Botticelli had even submitted a number of his Madonna-as-whore paintings to the flames to prove his devotion to the cause. Both Sandro and Colombina were considered leaders of the Pignoni now, and as such they saw everything that was being prepared for the bonfires.

They were working together today, preparing for the biggest fire yet in honor of the Lenten season. The hoard was so huge and impressive that Savonarola himself came out to inspect it.

“Ah, will you look at this! It shall give me so much joy to see this go up in the flames. Raise it up that I may see it.”

Two of the Pignoni held aloft what appeared to be a processional banner. A woman, a female saint, sat enthroned, surrounded by worshippers at her feet. Sandro swallowed hard as he recognized the Spinello Aretino masterpiece from Sansepolcro. He and Lorenzo had marched behind this banner when they were boys, in honor of the woman depicted so beautifully upon it, their Queen of Compassion, Maria Magdalena.

“But first, I must make an incision,” Savonarola declared, reaching into his robe to remove the little dagger he used at meals.

The banner depicted Magdalene holding a crucifix. Savonarola took his blade to the banner’s canvas, slashing it. He cut in bold strokes around the painted face of Jesus on the cross, salvaging the image of Christ. “Now, I shall keep this image of Our Lord from burning. But throw the whore into the flames!”

The other Pignoni cheered the piece of theater as Savonarola marched out of the courtyard. Sandro looked at Colombina and then around them. There were three carts, and each had two Pignoni working it. Sandro scurried over to claim the banner for his cart, and no one argued with him. They had perfected this process, but the banner was big and they would have to be careful here. Waiting until the other Pignoni took a break for lunch, Colombina and Sandro made their move. They removed the banner from the top of the pile and slipped it under the cart. A secret shelf space had been built into the carts for just this purpose. Since the implementation of the bonfires, Sandro and Colombina had been rescuing the finest art and literature of the Renaissance, one item at a time.

Once the banner was secured, they both relaxed a little. It was always stressful but worth every bit of risk. And when they were able to save something particularly sacred to the Order, all the better. Colombina looked to heaven and smiled at Lorenzo. He helped her every day, each step of the way.



Sandro and Colombina met at the Antica Torre that night to finish preparing the documentation. Rescuing the art wasn’t their primary objective, important though it was. They had been building a case against Savonarola for five years, documenting everything that came out of his mouth in his sermons and in his private dealings with the Pignoni. His pronouncements became more extreme as his power grew. His arrogance made him careless.

Savonarola had been censured by the pope, who was threatening to excommunicate him. The only reason Alexander VI hadn't taken action yet was that he didn't have a solid case against the man whom they all now called the Mad Monk. Savonarola, for all his tyrannical madness, was still the power broker in Florence. He controlled much of Tuscany along with it, and Alexander knew that he would require a fair amount of evidence to make the excommunication appear legitimate.

Colombina and Sandro were convinced that the documentation she had been carefully preparing all these years was not only enough to enforce the declaration of anathema but perhaps even enough to have Savonarola brought up on charges of heresy. Achieving his execution, and the absolute abolition of his reign of terror over Florence, was the only acceptable outcome after the republic's five years of near enslavement to the Pignoni.

Colombina summoned her son. While his name was Niccolò Ardinghelli, anyone with eyes would see that he was a Medici. His features were softer, like his mother's, but he had Lorenzo's eyes—and no small degree of Lorenzo's spirit. It was Niccolò who would take this package to Rome. He would present it first to his brothers in the Order, Giovanni and Giulio, and then the three of them would then take the evidence gathered over five hard years to Pope Alexander VI.

Colombina hugged him and wished him Godspeed, ensuring as she did that he was wearing the amulet that Lorenzo had left to him—the tiny protective locket with the sliver of the True Cross contained within it. It would keep him safe.

*Florence
present day*

“THE TIME RETURNS, Felicity.”

Felicity froze. She was in the rectory at Santa Felicita, preparing to leave, when her uncle arrived in the doorway. He was walking with a cane, and a younger priest supported him. She was shocked to see him, but more annoyed at the timing. She was in a hurry.

“What are you doing here? And how dare you quote their blasphemy to me!”

“It is not blasphemy, my child. It is truth. Whether you believe it or not, whether anyone believes it or not, it is simply true. And it is happening, Felicity. All around us. The time is returning and it will sweep all of us along

with it if we do not learn from the past.”

She spit at him, but he stopped her before she could say anything.

“You must hear me out before it is too late. This is bigger than you are, my child. Did you hear me? My child.”

Felicity sat down now, as a feeling of dread crawled over her. She knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“I am not your uncle, Felicity. I am your father. Your mother was ... is ... Sister Ursula.”

It all became clear to her then—the reason for her exile to the boarding schools in another country. The “mother” who never wanted her was, in actuality, a much-burdened aunt. Sister Ursula, the strict yet sympathetic nun who understood her visions and helped her to cultivate them, was her biological mother.

Like Savonarola, Girolamo de Pazzi had committed a sin and there was a daughter born of that. She was the spawn of that sin.

Oh God. *The time returns.* It really was true.

Felicity de Pazzi ran from the rectory room and into the garden. She fell to her knees and began to retch, her body shaking with the turmoil it was in.

Father Girolamo did not go after her. He was too tired and about to collapse with illness and exhaustion. He could only pray that his revelation to Felicity would somehow interrupt whatever it was she had planned.

But when he closed his eyes in an effort to sleep that night, all he saw in his dreams was fire.

*Montevecchio
present day*

THEY SAT IN the cozy living room of Destino’s little wooden house out near Careggi. Destino had invited them all out for the afternoon, indicating that he had some important things to show them, which could not be brought into Florence but which might help to heal them all after the tragic events of the preceding month. It had been two weeks since the explosion that had rocked Florence and injured Vittoria and Alexander.

Destino told them the amazing story of Savonarola, hoping that learning this extraordinary and secret piece of Renaissance history might offer them some distraction. He knew that the greatest balm for the soul was to throw oneself into gratifying work, and so he challenged them to discuss the importance of Savonarola and the perils of fanaticism. It was an important

lesson for the future.

“There was a movement to beatify Savonarola in the Catholic Church, around 1999,” Peter told them when Destino had finished this part of the story.

“Someone wanted to make the Mad Monk a saint?” Tammy was incredulous.

Peter nodded. “I remember it clearly because my order, the Jesuits, opposed it vehemently. They knew clearly what Savonarola was. History is fond of remembering him now as the great reformer of the church, but he was far more of a tyrant than the Medici or any other ruler in Florence.”

“He was a villain, and never doubt it,” Destino said. “A dangerous murderer. Not only a fanatic but a narcissist. He was out for his own power and nothing else. And would stop at nothing to achieve it.”

“Here is something I have always wondered, Destino,” Bérenger said. “History books say that Botticelli and Michelangelo became followers of Savonarola and that Sandro even burned some of his own paintings in the bonfires. Given the stories you tell of their involvement within the Medici family, I find that hard to believe.”

“History also says that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute,” Petra quipped, a wry smile crossing her lips. “Just how accurate are you finding history these days?”

“I have read that Michelangelo said, when he was dying, that he could still hear Savonarola’s voice in his ears,” Bérenger added. “Now I am beginning to see that differently.”

Destino nodded. “Michelangelo was present in that chamber, and he heard the terrible things that Savonarola said to Lorenzo. The names he called him, and Savonarola’s vow to destroy Lorenzo’s children. The monk was crafty, as always. He began by pouring wine and offering Lorenzo a drink of friendship and amity. They spoke of things in Florence that both knew and cared about, and Lorenzo relaxed more than he should have. It was after Savonarola was certain that Lorenzo had ingested enough wine—wine he had infused with poison—that he began to reveal his true reason for being there, which was primarily to torment Lorenzo as he lay dying. It was sadistic. Evil.

“And so when Michelangelo said at the time of his own old age that he could ‘still hear Savonarola’s voice ringing in his ears after all these years,’ this is what he meant. Sadly, this is how history fails us. That comment has been interpreted to mean that he was a follower of Savonarola, and that his righteous preaching still inspired him! Nothing could be further from the

truth.”

“And Sandro?” Maureen asked.

“Ah, Sandro. There is one more piece of this story yet to be told.”

Piazza della Signoria, Florence

May 23, 1498

“PIGNONI, PIGNONI!” The crowd jeered as the flames climbed higher.

Sandro Botticelli stood as close as he dared. He was known as a sympathizer, so it was in his best interest to stay out of the mob until after the execution. Later, he would redeem his reputation in Florence. But today he wanted only to appreciate the success of the harsh struggle of the last five years by watching the fruits of his labor.

Colombina was not with him, as women were not allowed in the piazza during the execution. They were kept on the perimeters for their own protection. The crowd was violent and dangerous, and there was too much potential for rioting and more bloodshed.

Girolamo Savonarola burned in the center of Florence, finding death in the same manner and in the same location as the art, literature, and culture he had been destroying for these last five years. There was a delicious irony in it, Sandro thought as he considered the date. May twenty-third. Forever after, he would call it the Day the Art Was Reborn.

Their package to Pope Alexander VI, created with such care by Colombina, had been welcomed with relish. It contained more than enough proof to accuse and convict Savonarola of heresy. And the timing was flawless, as the city of Florence was beginning to erupt with resentment over their oppression. The years of austerity had taken their toll, and a rebellion was brewing against the mad monk who had once been their savior. Mobs were very fickle. Thus when Savonarola was arrested, the divided city erupted into chaos and rioting.

From the look of the mob today, everyone supported the papal decision to declare Savonarola a heretic. Through the jeering shouts of “Pignoni” could also be heard “Florence is free.”

The smell of burning flesh sickened Sandro, who was not a violent man. He struggled mightily with his spirit on this day. He would need to get back to his devotions now that his task had been carried out. He would need to find forgiveness and move on. But not today. He would do that tomorrow.

Today he would celebrate at the tavern of Ognissanti, which had reopened this morning for the first time since Savonarola forced its closure years ago.

Today he would sit at the table he had shared so many times with Lorenzo, and he would raise a glass to his friend, his truest brother, for what he had given to him, to Florence, and to the world. Today he would write rather than sketch, write about the brother who had inspired him and the art they had created together. And then, perhaps, he would paint once again. It had been a long time, but today he was born anew.



Colombina made the journey to Monteverchio almost every Sunday morning. She would begin her day in prayer in the secret garden of Careggi, a place that had been her spiritual sanctuary since Lorenzo had first introduced her to it so many years ago. The statue of Mary Magdalene, the Queen of Compassion, shone with a beautiful patina despite the passing decades, as Colombina cleaned and polished it herself during each visit.

Following her weekly devotions, Colombina joined Fra Francesco, the Master, in his cottage, where she performed her duties as scribe to the order. She wrote as the Master dictated, careful to commit his words perfectly to paper. What they were creating here was sacred and complex, an encoded masterpiece of the teachings and history of the Order. It required all her concentration as the Master used a strange polyglot of Latin and Italian words, veering into Greek periodically. In addition to transcribing the allegorical storytelling exactly as he dictated, Colombina used her fine mind to organize the elaborate drawings and architectural data that would become instrumental to the volume's completion. It was growing to an immense size.

Fra Francesco had explained to her, "When we are finished, we will take it to Venice, to a leader of the Order there called Aldus, who will print it for us. For the first time in the history of the Order, we will have a record of our teachings that can be shown in public. The church will assume that it is heresy, but it will be so carefully encoded that they will never be able to prove it."

And so the work had continued in this way for the seven years since Lorenzo's death: Colombina carefully transcribing the text and inserting the drawings and artwork which had been collected by the Master from some of the great minds of the Renaissance. There was much of Lorenzo and Colombina's own story woven into the allegory: the legend of a man on a journey of discovery through a fantastic dreamscape, who finds the truth of life through love, a love which encounters and overcomes a great many

obstacles.

Colombina infused much of her own spirit into the writing and often felt Lorenzo's presence in the room with her as she worked. On the day that they grew very near to completion of the gargantuan work, she asked the Master, "What are you going to call this masterpiece of yours?"

He smiled at her, and the puckered scar at the side of his face twitched over the top of his beard as he answered. "It is not my masterpiece, Colombina. It belongs to all of us, to each of the great minds and lives who have contributed to this story. It belongs to every human being who chooses to claim it, learn from it, and become the hero of their own epic." He paused for a moment, considering. "As such, I think it should have a title that is universal and speaks to the journey of all mankind, reminds us of what is real and what is not. I was thinking of *The Strife of Love in a Dream*."

Colombina, who had endured the struggle to preserve true love, nodded. "Because love is the only true reality, and the rest is all a dream?"

"Of course." The Master nodded. "And because love conquers all."

The Poet Prince.

He was my friend, he was my brother.

I have painted the prophecy, his prophecy, in an allegory of Venus and Mars, using the two people Lorenzo loved most as models: Colombina and Giuliano.

*The Son of Man shall choose
when the time returns for the Poet Prince.
He who is a spirit of earth and water born
within the complex realm of the sea goat
and the bloodline of the blessed.
He who will submerge the influence of Mars
And exalt the influence of Venus
To embody grace over aggression.
He will inspire the hearts and minds of the people
So as to illuminate the path of service
And show them the Way.
This is his legacy,
This, and to know a very great love.*

Colombina is Venus, of course, and she is awake and exalted in her beauty, as the prophecy states. Mars is shown here sleeping, to indicate that he has been submerged. The little Pan creatures, symbolic of Capricornus, blow from a seashell to allude further to the submersion.

The love of Venus and Mars is epic, and it is clear here that she has given him grace over aggression. She has shown him the Way, and it is a very great love indeed.

*I remain,
Alessandro di Filipepi, known as “Botticelli”*

FROM THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI

*Montevecchio
present day*

IT WAS LIKE a museum—the most magical, extraordinary museum any of them had ever seen. Destino and Petra were positively giddy as they rolled back the antique Persian carpet to reveal the trapdoor in the floor of Destino’s little house. It led to a staircase, more like a ladder, which each of them descended in single file.

The house, once Medici property, was built over one of the apple cellars in Montevecchio, similar to the one that Cosimo had once locked Fra Filippo in while he fulfilled his delinquent commissions. But Destino had been storing his treasures here for centuries—Botticelli paintings and Michelangelo sketches, priceless jewelry and artifacts. There were hundreds of documents. It would take years to sort through the items in this cellar, to catalogue them, to analyze them.

“Dear Lord, Destino. You need a state-of-the-art security system. This collection is priceless.”

Destino laughed. “God is my security system. No one will steal from me here. It has not happened in five hundred years and I do not think it will happen now. But come, I have gifts for each of you. Tammy and Roland first.”

He moved them to a corner of the room where there was an object on the ground, covered by a heavy blanket. He signaled to Roland to help him, and they carefully unveiled the item beneath the covering. It was a hand-carved cradle, of the most remarkable craftsmanship. It was carved with the Magdalene’s seal along the edges.

“This cradle was made for the birth of Matilda of Canossa. It will be a fitting place for your baby girl to sleep. She will be a fiery one, as Petra says, just as our Matilda was. And this will bring her angelic dreams as she makes the transition into our world.”

Tammy, who was on her knees examining it, burst into tears. “It’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

“How can we thank you for this?” Roland whispered.

“By raising a daughter through love who will fulfill her fiery destiny and change the world the way that she sees fit within her own unique mission. That is the only thing any of us need.”

He called Peter and Petra over and handed them a large box, indicating they should open it together. They did, and it contained a set of antique hand mirrors.

“As you rediscover your eternal love, you will see the truth: that beloveds are a reflection of each other, always. These were used in the secret wedding of Lorenzo and Colombina. It gives me great joy to know that your own union will never have to be a secret.”

The next box was for Maureen, who was already in tears from the miracles happening all around her. Each object in this room was alive with the power of its history. Bérenger teased her, “Maybe you better sit down for this one.”

Destino nodded his agreement. “Yes,” he said softly, “I believe that perhaps she should sit down for this.” He motioned to a beautifully carved chair with velvet cushions, no doubt a piece of furniture with a history all its own. Destino placed a wooden chest in her hands and motioned for her to open it. Maureen did and gingerly removed layer upon layer of red silk fabric, which covered the object within it. When the silk was clear and Maureen could see the object in full view, she gasped.

It was an alabaster jar.

She looked at Destino and awaited the explanation, afraid to consider the truth of what she might be holding in her hands.

“You already know what it is, my dear,” he said softly. The others in the room were motionless, silent. Maureen lifted the jar carefully from its place in the chest. The alabaster appeared to shine from within, giving the jar a pinkish glow. She opened the lid, and though the jar was empty, it contained the faintest scent of something ancient and spiced and sacred.

“It is the jar with which our Queen of Compassion anointed her beloved, first for their wedding and last at his burial. It was handed down through the female line for many centuries before coming to rest safely in Sansepolcro, with the relics of the Order. All these were moved to Florence during Lorenzo’s reign, when we were afraid that Sixtus would take Sansepolcro and confiscate everything. But now it belongs to you. I am certain that she would want you to have it.”

And it all sank in then, for Maureen and for everyone in that room.

Destino truly was what he had always claimed to be: a man tormented to live eternally in a world that would never understand him. His existence, his survival, was the greatest of all miracles, a reminder that anything was possible, and that there were untold layers to reality above and beyond what we allow ourselves to understand.

Maureen could see that Destino was growing very tired now, but he had one more gift to give. He walked over to Bérenger and put his hands on both sides of his face. “It is your time now, my prince. Time for you to become what you are, time for you to be the leader you were born to be. I need you to take what I shall give you as a symbolic scepter. You are to become a leader into a new age, a new world of love and enlightenment. Remember that God has given you the most extraordinary blessings that you may devote the rest of your life to this mission of restoring the Way of Love. Can you pledge to do that?

“I can,” Bérenger whispered.

“Then to you I give the one true Spear of Destiny.”

Destino removed a heavy iron key from a hook on the wall and opened the lock of a crate that ran half the length of the cellar. He motioned for Bérenger to assist in opening it. As the lid opened, blue light emanated from the box. Pale at first, and then growing brighter, it became an intense indigo, which swirled through the room before returning back to the object from which it had come. *Il giavelotto di destino*. The Spear of Destiny.

“Unlike the false spears, with their legends of evil spirits and death, this, the spear I carried when I committed the greatest crime against humanity, is an object of goodness and positive power. It is an object of transformation. See here, bring it up and look closely. Go ahead, Bérenger. It is for you to wield now.”

Bérenger lifted the spear out reverently as Destino pointed to the tip. It was caked with blood.

“His blood transformed me. As did his love. This spear is the emblem of how the most irredeemable soul can be transformed through love. This is the ultimate lesson of the Way, the lesson you must all pledge to remember and to teach to the world.”

They were all in tears now, tears of joy and awe at the miracles that were happening in this magical little cellar, when all hell broke loose.



“Fire!”

Roland smelled it first, but as he took notice and began to warn the others, they heard the crash of timber falling. The little house was ancient and made of wood, and it would burn quickly. They had to get out of the cellar fast. Roland went up first so that he could haul the women up from the top, with Peter and Bérénger helping to push them quickly from the bottom. The three women scrambled, Maureen wrapping the alabaster jar in her blouse while Petra did the same with the mirrors. Tammy glanced back at the cradle; there was no time to save it. Once the women were safe, Bérénger and Roland motioned for Destino to go next.

He shook his head.

“Come on!” Bérénger yelled. “We don’t have much time before the whole place caves in.” Bérénger was in a panic. He could hear the devastation as the fire crackled through the house. The smoke was getting heavy.

“No!” Destino shouted. “I will go last. You must make sure that Maureen is safe—and the spear. Go. Now!”

Bérénger handed the spear up to Roland and climbed as fast as his legs would take him.

“Maureen!” he screamed, but he could see nothing. The house was engulfed in flames and smoke. He heard her voice, faint, yelling, “I’m here, I’m out, follow my voice.”

Bérénger looked down to where Peter was emerging from the cellar and gave him a hand up. They both looked down to grab for Destino, but as they did so, the ceiling collapsed above them. Both men jumped quickly out of the way, but it was clear what had happened: the door to the cellar had been completely covered with flames and burning timber. They would not be able to get to Destino. And he had known it.

Bérénger and Peter could see nothing now, but they ran to where they heard voices calling to them through the chaos. Bérénger, holding the Spear of Destiny in his hand, felt as if it propelled him forward. He followed an instinct, grabbing Peter with the other hand and running in the direction that the spear pulled him. In just a few seconds, they were out in the Tuscan night, where they could breathe. The others waited for them, tears of fear and joy as they counted heads and determined that everyone was safe. Everyone but Destino.

“Oh God,” Maureen cried. “We’ve lost him.”

There was no time to mourn. A scream of agony split the air, and they ran around the rear of the house, now a raging conflagration. The little group, each dripping sweat and smeared black with smoke, stopped in horror at the sight ahead of them.

Felicity de Pazzi was in the center of the flames.

She had been on the roof, and as she had poured the little canister of gasoline on the shingles, she had inadvertently spilled some on her clothes and on the bandages that wrapped her damaged hands. The fire spread, too hot and too fast, catching her clothing in it. Dizzy from blood loss and exhausted, she didn't move as fast as she normally would. But this would be her only chance to eliminate all of them—every remaining member of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher—at one time. This was for God's greater glory, the ultimate gift she could give to her Lord. She could not, would not, fail him now.

When the roof caved in before she could move away from the center, she was engulfed in the flames. The gasoline on her clothing ensured that her death would be quick.



Destino felt no pain, no fear. He felt only the sadness of leaving the beautiful men and women who had attended him here in the end. They would mourn for him, but he did not wish them to. He was ready. His life had been more extraordinary than most could imagine or even understand. And now his work was done. He was quite certain that the six who remained would fulfill their promises: to God, to themselves, to each other, and to him. They would work toward restoring the Way of Love to the world, and they would do it together.

The time returns.

And his time was returning as well. He was returning to his mother and father in heaven. He was surrounded again by the blue light, and engulfed in a feeling of universal love, as the man known by many names through time—Longinus, Fra Francesco, the Master, Destino—closed his eyes for the final time in his earthly life.

*Florence
present day*

DESTINO HAD LEFT one final gift behind.

The Libro Rosso, the blessed red book that had held the secret traditions of Jesus Christ and his descendants for two thousand years, had been transferred

to Petra's apartment before the fire.

There was one final card wedged beneath the cover of the book, addressed to Peter. It said simply,

*You are as wise as Solomon, for you have chosen Sheba.
Restore these teachings
while praying that they will be welcomed
in peace by all people
and there will be no more martyrs.*



Bérenger Sinclair shook the hand of Pietro Buondelmonti while Maureen spoke soft words of comfort to his wife, the Baroness von Hapsburg. Vittoria was still in a coma. She and Alexander had fallen two stories from her balcony in the explosion. Alexander was in traction with multiple breaks and fractures, and it would be months before he would walk again—perhaps longer. But Vittoria's head trauma had been more serious. Her recovery was still far from certain. Both had been spared from the fire as a result of the fall, however, and that was a blessing of sorts.

It had been a difficult decision for the baroness and her husband to agree to what Bérenger proposed, but they both knew that it was the best thing for Dante. They signed the paperwork in the solicitor's office after the terms had been drawn up to everyone's satisfaction. Dante Buondelmonti Sinclair would be raised by his uncle, Bérenger Sinclair, at the château in France, until such time as his parents were recovered and able to care for him. He would spend summers with his grandparents in Austria and Italy, as he learned the languages, culture, and heritage of the three noble families from which he was descended.

Dante would become the symbolic big brother to Serafina Gelis, the newborn daughter of Tamara and Roland Gelis. The children would learn together from the Libro Rosso and grow into their angelic destinies together.

The legacy of the Poet Prince would thrive into the future, with only love as its teacher.

*Rome
1521*

POPE LEO X sat quietly in his study, relieved to be alone after the many days of emergency meetings and councils. He drank deeply from the heavy red wine in the goblet, which was ironically etched with intertwined wedding rings. It was his favorite vintage, from Montepulciano, and he had it brought in from

his native Tuscany by the barrel. The pontiff could not stomach the watery swill the Romans called wine and refused to serve it anywhere within his reach. Why drink gutter water when the nectar of the gods was available instead?

He smiled and thought that his teacher, Angelo Poliziano, would laugh if he were here now to witness that pagan reference. Of course Angelo would be the first to celebrate the events of the last few years, and certainly with the wine that came from his own hometown.

There was a gentle knock on the door, and Leo sighed heavily. He wanted no company tonight, and yet it was inevitable. His gout was bothering him and he did not feel the urge to get up, so he merely called out “Come in” and hoped that the visitor was someone he cared to deal with on a night like this.

God is indeed good, he thought, as the tall figure of his cousin, Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, entered. Giulio was the only person he could stand to see at the moment. He was the only person he could stand to see most of the time. This was the one person alive with whom he could be entirely free with his thoughts and words.

“Come in, come drink with me. We have much to celebrate today.”

Giulio nodded, pouring the wine into a matching goblet. He nodded at the portrait on the wall before taking his first sip.

“I could feel him today, Gio.” Giulio never called the pope anything but his given name. It was a privilege of those from a close family. “It was as if he were here, watching us, willing us to do the right thing. Just as he always did.”

Pope Leo X looked up at the portrait of his father and raised his glass. “This was for you, Papa. All of it was for you.” The pope’s dark eyes, nearly black, were identical to those of the man in the portrait. They filled with tears as he thought of his father, whom he still missed so much.

“History will not remember me kindly, Giulio, for what was done today. For what has been done these past three years.”

Giulio, always the most serious of the children, now did something very rare: he smiled.

“But we did it, Giovanni. We did it.”

“Well, we started it. There is much still to do, but we did indeed fulfill our promise today. And if history remembers me as weak, incompetent, and indulgent, then so be it. It was my promise to carry out this deed, and I have done it. I knew what it might cost me, but it is a small price to pay for the

ultimate victory.”

They both drank, reflecting on the events of the past weeks. Four years earlier, a rebellious upstart priest and professor of theology in Germany, one Martin Luther by name, had declared a type of holy war against the Catholic Church. In an act of genius, he had rallied the common folk by nailing a document to the door of a cathedral in Wittenberg. Luther’s document, called *The Ninety-five Theses*, condemned the church for a number of wrongdoings, several of which had been actively instigated and encouraged by Leo X and his cousin, Cardinal Giulio.

Pope Leo X had come out against Luther for his audacity but had done so very slowly. He took three years to investigate and ultimately excommunicate the heretic, who clearly had an intention no less grandiose than trying to destroy the Catholic Church.

The pontiff had been heavily criticized by many of his brother cardinals and other Church leaders throughout Europe, who were insisting that he take a harsher, quicker stand against Luther and his growing movement of reformers. But Pope Leo X had been adamant that such events should be carefully considered and dealt with only after much time and thought. He sent papal envoys—all Medici friends and supporters—to Germany to investigate Luther, but these events seemed only to inflame the reformers and add more, and increasingly rabid, members to the movement. By the time Luther was excommunicated, his followers were so swelled in number and strong of spirit that the decree of anathema against Luther was worn as a badge of honor and celebrated throughout the reformist movement.

To be excommunicated by a church one despised was a blessing.

Today, in a series of heated debates, Pope Leo X decreed that no further action would be taken against Martin Luther. He proclaimed that the sentence of excommunication was enough; the reformers would no doubt be disheartened by this act and their little rebellion would diminish. There were other matters at hand that Leo X wished to deal with—the rebuilding of Saint Peter’s, his new commissions for Michelangelo and their other favored angelic, Raphael, while an exciting new artist appearing out of the Venetian school, a man called Tiziano, warranted special cultivation.

The conservative cardinals were outraged. Was the pope completely mad? How could he not see that the Catholic Church was faced with a revolution the like of which it had never seen before? Further, he had already squandered several fortunes on art and architectural commissions, solidifying his reputation for frivolity and fueling the fires of the reformers. Did the pope not understand the gravity of the circumstances they were in? Did he not realize

that the very future of Catholicism was possibly threatened by these protestors?

None but the most intimate inner circle would ever know that Pope Leo X saw the threat very clearly. Those who mumbled about his ineptitude and railed against his lack of leadership for the Church would never have guessed just how brilliant, committed, and purposeful Pope Leo X was in every single choice he ever made. He had, in fact, carried out a carefully orchestrated plan that had been put in place when he was made the youngest cardinal in history at the age of fourteen. His partner in the plot was his cousin Cardinal Giulio, the sullen child who held a lifetime grudge against the Church that had sanctioned the murder of his father during High Mass on Easter Sunday. But they were not the founders of the plot; they were merely the latest in a long series of operatives.

“Send our most trusted messenger to Wittenberg,” the pope said to Giulio, “with a message to Luther telling him that his job was well accomplished and we are most grateful. He has served the Order to perfection.

“But first, come and drink with me—one final toast to the man who put all this into place so fearlessly. To Lorenzo il Magnifico, a wonderful father and the greatest poet prince to ever live. We have kept our promise to you!”

He raised his goblet to Giulio, who returned the gesture. “To Lorenzo,” Giulio said, before adding, “and in memory of my father, Giuliano, that such crimes will never be committed in the name of any papal authority again.”

And the first Medici pope, Leo X, drank a toast with Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici. Once a boy orphaned by the acts of a corrupt Church, he would one day follow his cousin to the throne of Saint Peter, to become Pope Clement VII.

After all, they weren’t Medici for nothing.

EPILOGUE

England
1527

I SEEK NO OTHER.

Anne read through the letter once again, whispering the words aloud and savoring each passion-filled syllable.

*Henceforward, my heart shall be dedicated to you alone.
I wish my body was, too. God can do it if He pleases—
and to Him I pray every day to that end,
and hoping that one day my prayer will be heard.
I wish the time to be short, but fear that it may be long
until we see each other again.*

*Written by the hand of that secretary who in heart, body, and will
is your loyal and most devoted servant.*

The lovesick suitor who called himself Anne's *loyal and most devoted servant* signed his declaration with a phrase in medieval French borrowed from the love songs of the troubadours,: *Aultre ne cherse*. I seek no other.

She sighed with the beauty of it all, and then once again with the pain. For as much as her passion was reciprocal, the object of her affection was unattainable by the laws of this land. He was a married man and a father, and therefore utterly off-limits. Yet his letter indicated "God can do it if He pleases," as if to reassure her that their love was so strong and surely destined that God would intervene to change their circumstances. In the European courts, where she spent her childhood, Anne had been taught that love conquers all. Holding fast to that belief, she went to retrieve her Book of Hours from its resting place on her bedside table.

A smile played across Anne's lips as she paged through her cherished prayer book. It was an exquisite masterpiece of Flemish art, an illuminated private volume given to her by her grand teacher, Margaret of Austria. But it was neither the artistry nor the sentimental value of the book that brought the smile to her now. It was the handwritten notes in the margins. Anne and her lover had devised a clever method in which to pass secret messages to each other—through her prayer book during church services. His last message had been inscribed on a page depicting Jesus Christ following the flagellation, a

man of sorrows, beaten and bleeding. It read, in her preferred French:

If you remember my love in your prayers as strongly as I adore you, I shall hardly be forgotten, for I am yours forever.

His message was clear: I suffer for the love of you.

Anne had given careful consideration to her response. She chose to reply on a beautifully illustrated page of the Annunciation, wherein the lovely Madonna is told by the angel Gabriel that she will bear a son. Composing a couplet in English, she wrote:

*By daily proof you shall me find
To be to you both loving and kind.*

The symbolism was unmistakable; Anne had chosen wisely. The selection of the Annunciation was an emphasis on the glorious event of God bestowing a son upon a most blessed woman. This was her promise to her lover: she would be both loving and kind to him and she would give him the son he most desired. Whereas her beloved was a married man and a father, his wife had given him only one living child, a girl.

To emphasize her sacred promise, Anne added a final signature to the book, one which she knew he would comprehend immediately. She wrote in French this time, invoking the Troubadour tradition—and something else, a secret vow that only he would recognize—as she inscribed: *Le temps viendra.*

The time will return.

She completed her signature with the tiny drawing of an astrolabe, a symbol of time and its cycles, an emblem of time returning, before writing her name with full flourish:

*Je * Anne Boleyn*

Later that afternoon, as the king's own chaplain droned the words of the Mass to the small group gathered in the royal chapel, Anne Boleyn quietly passed her prayer book to her secret beloved. Anne's father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, acted as her messenger. Sir Thomas's importance in the court and as a confidant of the king allowed him the privileged position of sitting beside his sovereign during Mass. He was more than willing to encourage the growing affection between his younger daughter and the king.

Henry VIII, King of England, received the message intended for him and held the book to his heart. The tears in his eyes blurred his vision as he gazed upon the woman he loved and whispered across the chapel to her, "The time *will* return, my Anne. We will see to it that it is so."

How had it all gone so terribly wrong?

Anne had much time to contemplate this question as she sat in her cell, awaiting the moment of her execution. The French swordsman had arrived from Calais, prepared for his grotesque mission; he would separate her head from her delicate neck with a single slice of his sharpened weapon. It was Henry's final gift to his beloved. As he had signed her death warrant, the king had also softened her sentence: Anne Boleyn, the queen of England, would not be burned at the stake as a convicted heretic and traitor. In an unexpected act of mercy, Henry had sent to France for an executioner who could put an end to both her life and his misery quickly, efficiently, and as painlessly as possible.

It had been nine years since Anne and Henry had pledged to each other that the time would return. Anne held that same prayer book now, running her finger over the fading ink of that golden promise she had once believed—they had *both* believed—would change the world. Make no mistake, Henry had been as committed to this mission as she was. Their love had been real and it had been an unstoppable force for both good and ill.

Anne paused on the astrolabe to contemplate the passing of time. She had so little left. There was one more thing she must accomplish before leaving this life, one final act of devotion to the mission. She must find a way to protect her tiny, precious, red-haired daughter. Picking up her quill, Anne began to write the letter in French:

Beloved Marguerite,

By the time you receive this letter you will be aware of just how spectacularly I have failed you. There is so little time for me to express my sadness and regret. And yet all is not lost. We have accomplished much toward our goals, and we must not allow my death to stem the tide that is washing over this great land.

I write to remind you of my deep fondness and admiration for you, and to entreat as my final wish that you will find a way to impart your vision, our vision, to my daughter. Let me assure you that Elizabeth is the golden child of our dreams, conceived perfectly and immaculately in a place of trust and consciousness within all rules of The Order.

I beg of you, do not fail her. Even now, she shows a strength and a brilliance that is beyond compare. If Elizabeth is protected, she alone will ensure that the Time Will Return.

Anne

*Arques, France
present day*

MAUREEN AWOKE TO another dawn breaking over the hills of Arques. She sat up gently, so as not to wake Béranger sleeping beside her, but to no avail. Béranger, so attuned to her moods and energies, opened his eyes as soon as she stirred.

“You okay, my love?”

Maureen looked at him and shook her head. She ran her hands over her throat and whispered, “And I have a little neck.”

“What?” Béranger sat up now, concerned.

“That is what she said, while awaiting her execution. It would be swift because she had a little neck.”

“Who said it? What execution?”

“Anne Boleyn.”

The realization dawned on him then. “You were dreaming again.”

She nodded. This had been the strangest and most vivid dream Maureen had ever experienced. She was not simply observing Anne Boleyn in the Tower of London, she *was* Anne Boleyn. She was experiencing the thoughts and feelings and memories of one of the most notorious queen in history as she prepared to die.

Maureen was not an expert on English history, but she had long been fascinated by the story of King Henry VIII and his six wives. Anne had been the catalyst for the Reformation in England, as Henry had defied the pope to be with her.

History did not remember Anne Boleyn kindly. She was most often portrayed as a scheming adulteress of depraved and unlimited ambition.

But the Anne in Maureen’s dream was a very different woman. Maureen could feel the lump rising in her throat and tears stinging behind her eyes as she remembered the excruciating pain and desperation of the tragic queen in the tower.

She knew she would soon be uncovering a new version of history that was waiting for her beneath the layers of five centuries of lies.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

While writing this book, I thought often of the old saw about painting the Golden Gate Bridge: it is a task that is never complete. I could spend the rest of my life writing a book about the birth of the Renaissance and never be finished. There were so many characters, story lines, and added pieces of information that could have—and perhaps should have—been included. The vast array of artists and their works, the humanists and patrons, and the histories and anecdotes surrounding them all is as daunting as it is inspiring.

A prime example is the rich and prevalent influence of Dante's work (as well as that of Petrarch and Boccaccio) on the elder Cosimo de' Medici and later on Lorenzo and his circle. They all deserve celebration, if not lengthy analysis, but I had to jettison those elements, as they took me too far afield from what was already complicated storytelling.

The finer points of Neoplatonism in the Renaissance are worthy of volumes, and indeed have inspired them, yet I toned down Plato in an effort to play up heresy. And while I believe that no intelligent person can argue that the Neoplatonist movement wasn't critical to the unfolding of Renaissance art, I stand by my assertion that it was one element of many, and the most important of these was heresy. Neoplatonism was often a front for the true heretical teachings that were preserved in these great masterpieces. The Gnostic concept of becoming *anthropos*—a fully realized and enlightened human—is essentially identical to what we now think of as humanism. The difference is that to be *anthropos*, one must attain a personal connection to God, becoming fully human through that direct connection. Heresy!

There was initially an entire subplot in this book about the fifteenth-century enigmatic literary masterpiece known as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and how Lorenzo inspired and influenced it. Unfortunately, the *Hypnerotomachia* is such a complicated subject that I have had to save that information for another day, another time, another book! Those familiar with that book may have caught the reference to it when Colombina ends her life writing for Destino.

The bibliography for the books in the Magdalene Line series consists of hundreds of volumes (a partial list of which is posted on my website, www.kathleenmcgowan.com). But the Hope diamond in my library is the volume written by Professor Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love*:

Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent (Princeton Press). After years of wading through Botticelli commentary, in which each new authority contradicts the previous with astounding vitriol, the discovery of Dempsey was one of the great eureka moments in my research career.

Dempsey's book is brilliant, and I am grateful for the enlightenment that I gleaned from it—and apologize to Professor Dempsey for the more extreme conclusions I have drawn, which are mine alone. While Dempsey never makes a definitive case for Lucrezia Donati as the centerpiece of *Primavera*, as the icon of love personified, he refers to it as a distinct possibility. I would also like to assert that I came to my own conclusions about Lucrezia's esteemed position in Botticelli's work several years before reading Dempsey.

Dempsey is also the only art historian I have found who admits a likeness between the woman in *Fortitude* and the woman at the center of *Primavera*. This was, in fact, my own observation in the Uffizi Gallery in the spring of 2001 as I moved from the room that housed Botticelli's two small *Judith* pieces and the *Fortitude* into the main Botticelli room. Although the Uffizi has altered the collections in those rooms recently, moving *Judith* into the main Botticelli salon, there used to be a magical place in the gallery which I referred to as "the Lucrezia Donati spot." One could stand in front of the case displaying *Judith* and see the full version of *Fortitude* and the central figure from *Primavera* in the same sight line. It was in doing this that I became certain that the same woman was the model for all. Even the tilt of her head is the same, but in a mirror image from *Primavera* to *Fortitude*. And thanks to Botticelli's mastery of the infusion technique, I discovered that I felt something about this woman, experienced some element of her character, when I stood before the paintings. I began to look at those pieces with new eyes, and am convinced that all three are Lucrezia Donati. I believe that Colombina's specific and charming tilt of the head is also found in some of Sandro's early Madonnas.

That said, I am not an art historian and make no claims to be, although I am a most ardent and committed art enthusiast and have been blessed to spend much of the last two decades loitering in the great art museums of the world. And I have eyes. Sometimes it's just that simple.

I find that much of the evidence art historians draw their conclusions from is necessarily circumstantial, and yet their assumptions often astound me in their simplicity and—dare I say it—irresponsibility. For example, many art experts believe that *Primavera* was not commissioned by Lorenzo the Magnificent but rather by his cousin Lorenzo (the Much Lesser) Pierrofrancesco de' Medici. The reason for this assumption is that an inventory

was done upon il Magnifico's death in 1492, and *Primavera* was in the Pierofrancesco household at that time. Now, there are countless reasons why paintings commissioned by Lorenzo the Magnificent during his life may not have been in his personal collection at the time of his death, so to assert definitively that he was not the patron of such a huge, expensive, and personal piece—simply because his cousin had it in 1492—seems irresponsible to me.

I have made a sport of sitting in front of some of the greatest artworks in the world so that I may listen to the various guides, critics, and experts comment on the masterpiece at hand. I have spent hours in Botticelli's salon, listening to the varied explanations of *Primavera*. Invariably, each expert asserts a definitive explanation of the painting's meaning. And, equally invariably, these assertions differ—often dramatically. There were times when I delighted in the idea that art is so expansive that it provides us with almost infinite opportunity for interpretation; others when I despaired at the idea of ever really grasping what the artist's true intentions may have been. Once I discovered the concept of “infusion” and learned to feel the art as well as see it, my appreciation of these masterpieces was enhanced beyond measure.

Much of what you read about the Medici in English refers to them in unpleasant terms: tyrants, hedonists, and worse. I mentioned this recently at an event in Italy, and my comments were met with stares of disbelief. Lorenzo de' Medici was the father of the Renaissance, the champion of the Italian language, and a man known for his generosity and enlightened way of living. Most of the Italians I have discussed this with find it unfathomable that history views Lorenzo in any other light. It was in discovering Lorenzo's greatness, and Cosimo's before him, that I became an ardent champion of the Medici. I believe that much of the confusion comes from the generations of Medici who followed Lorenzo and were indeed corrupt. I think Lorenzo himself would have been horrified and sadly disappointed to watch as his descendants lost their way and abandoned the principles of love, beauty, and *anthropos* that he and his grandfather worked to preserve.

I came across references to how the Medici “locked their artists in basements and forced them to paint,” but then I would discover these fantastic stories about how Donatello and Lippi were utterly devoted to Cosimo. I use the word *devotion* specifically as it indicates love: these artists loved their patrons, they didn't just serve them. Donatello really did beg to be buried at Cosimo's feet and he really is buried alongside him in San Lorenzo. These are not the actions of an artist who was abused. I can see how Cosimo's often comical relationship with Fra Lippi could be misinterpreted by history, and I was determined to show the beauty of it.

I was stunned to discover in my research that both Botticelli and Michelangelo lived as members of the Medici family in their youth. Lorenzo adopted Michelangelo at the age of thirteen in everything but name, and the boy was utterly committed to his foster father. There is also an argument that Sandro Botticelli was similarly “adopted” by Lucrezia and Piero and raised as Lorenzo’s brother, as I have depicted here. Little is recorded about Botticelli’s personal life, but esteemed British historian Christopher Hibbert makes this assertion in his book *The House of Medici*, as well as providing the description of Botticelli’s commission to create the *Madonna of the Magnificat* for Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici.

The understanding that Michelangelo and Botticelli were members of the Medici “spirit family” drove me to grasp the Savonarola period. Art and history assert that both these great, heretical artists became followers of Savonarola. I will never believe that, not even for a moment. They were both utterly devoted to the Medici and the mission, and neither would have embraced a man who sought to destroy Lorenzo. I do believe that in the early days Savonarola was welcomed into Florence as someone who could have been a tool to revolutionize the Church and eradicate corruption in Rome following Pope Sixtus and the chaos created by the entire Riario family. It all went terribly wrong. Michelangelo is widely quoted to have said about Savonarola, “I will hear his voice ringing in my ears until the day I die.” That quote is interpreted by art and history experts to mean that Michelangelo was a follower of Savonarola. I beg to differ. I think Michelangelo said it because he knew that Savonarola ultimately destroyed Lorenzo and everything they hoped to achieve together.

I realize that my assertion that Savonarola hastened Lorenzo’s death is controversial, but I also believe it is possible. Even if he did not physically poison Lorenzo, he certainly did so spiritually. I think the voice of Savonarola haunted Michelangelo because it took away his foster father and his primary inspiration. The influence of the Order and Lorenzo can be seen throughout the Sistine Chapel, where touches of heresy abound. Who is that woman next to Jesus in the Last Judgment? Does that really look like his mother to you? And of course, Michelangelo sculpted Mary Magdalene as the prominent figure in the Florentine *Pietà*, which he created for his own tomb, and which I think speaks volumes about the artist’s beliefs.

Sandro was even further devoted to Lorenzo as his brother and his patron, so I believe passionately that the time in which he was recorded as being a Pignoni was essentially Sandro working as a double agent, as I have portrayed it here. His art plays out this theme, time and time again.

The story of Saint Felicity began to haunt me after a more recent trip to

Florence. Standing before the painting of the saint and her seven dead sons had the same effect on me as it does on Tammy: it sickened me. Personally compounding the experience was the fact that the youngest child painted as dead on his mother's lap was the image of my own youngest son. Something crystallized for me in that moment, some tragic understanding of how it all went so wrong, how the teachings of love are lost in the fires of fanaticism. I wanted to shriek at that painting, *Everything about this is so wrong! This is not what God wants from us!*

I wrote the prologue to illustrate the fanatical version of Felicity's life, rather than celebrate her as a martyr. I wrestled with that prologue for a long time. It is a brutal story, and I considered toning it down—until I went online to investigate Saint Felicity and how she is viewed by followers in the twenty-first century. I was stunned, and further sickened, to discover a suggestion posted by a mother in honor of Saint Felicity's feast day: she advocated taking seven of your child's favorite toys and destroying them in front of the child, emphasizing all the while that this is what Felicity endured, and these are the sacrifices we are required to make for God.

Even writing that last sentence makes me queasy. I cannot believe that any woman of spirit thinks this is a lesson of love that God would want for any of his children. It was the realization that this type of fanaticism is still influencing our children in modern times that doubled my determination to tell Felicity's story in all its horror. I wanted to show it for what it was, and I hope it will make people think. It certainly has made me think, and it became critical to the theme of this book, as Felicity and Savonarola both illustrate the dangers of fanaticism over tolerance. Some of Felicity's words of dialogue were taken verbatim from early Church records.

I became hopelessly devoted to Lorenzo il Magnifico during my research, to the point of what was, at times, a literally feverish obsession. I knew I had to write much of this book in Florence because I needed to have the energy of Lorenzo all around me. Not a day went by in my final stages of writing in Florence when I did not "visit" Lorenzo in some way. My morning walk took me past his statue in front of the Uffizi. Sometimes I went into that museum just to see the Vasari portrait (my favorite representation of him), although it is poorly displayed and behind glass, so I find the glare ultimately frustrating. Still, I love that it is adjacent to a painting of Cosimo. I finally bought a copy of the Vasari, framed it, and kept the Magnificent One on my desk when I wrote (I'm gazing at him right now), even traveling with the more portable postcards of the image.

I visited the Medici Palace on Via Larga (now Via Cavour) every few days

so that I could spend time in the last known repository of the Libro Rosso, the gorgeous Gozzoli Chapel, and in Lorenzo's chambers, which are now the site of a very space-age, multimedia interactive tourist attraction. I took issue with this development at first but came to the conclusion that anything that makes history interesting and interactive is a good thing, and that Lorenzo himself would probably really be into it if he were here today. He was, after all, a pioneer in the arts.

My regular trips to the Uffizi really began to feel like I was going to visit my friends, and I would often start with the Lucrezia Donati spot, then work my way into the main Botticelli room to chat with Sandro. I really came to believe that Lorenzo and his Colombina were urging me to tell their story in a most human way, surrounded by the people who loved them most. Those people just happen to be the greatest artists and minds of the Renaissance. And of course, I stay exclusively in the Antica Torre Tornabuoni when I am in Florence, so that I may live in the footsteps of the beloved couple and the Order that inspired them. I swear, their conjoined spirits roam the roof deck of that turret that overlooks Santa Trinità and has the most inspiring view I quite possibly have ever seen. I don't get much sleep when I stay there, but I know that I'll always be in good company.

As for Lucrezia Donati, there is very little known about her life specifically. The lives of women in the Renaissance, unless they were monarchs, were not well recorded. Factor in that Lorenzo himself would have wanted to keep her out of the public eye as much as possible, and I think we have some very deliberate obfuscation. It is the same principle as secret society activity. There is no documentary evidence for most of it because there was never meant to be any! That's precisely the point of its being *secret*. I found Colombina through the art and poetry of the time and tried to see her and experience her through the eyes of Lorenzo and Sandro. But, as with Mary Magdalene and Matilda before her, she became very real and alive to me, and my passion to tell her story took over as I wrote about the period.

I speak of history as a mosaic, and it has been a very beautiful one for me. Little pieces fall into place and begin to clarify the picture. Single sentences from research books have often altered the course of my understanding of these characters and their lives. One book on Lorenzo's art collections speaks of Lucrezia Donati's son searching desperately for a lost painting of his mother—commissioned by Lorenzo and in his private collection. This led me on the path of investigating the boy's parentage. I cannot prove that Lucrezia Donati had a son fathered by Lorenzo de' Medici, but I do believe it to be true.

Another jeweled tile in my mosaic came from an art journal that referred

to the original title of *Primavera* as “likely called *Le Temps Revient*.” Beautiful! The legend of Lorenzo’s banner, and the reason that the great defender and proponent of the Italian language would carry a mysterious motto in medieval French is something that has baffled historians for five hundred years. That is because historians were missing the secret society element, the heretical understandings of the Order, and the Medici connection to these heresies. The banner led me to uncover the connections between Cosimo and René d’Anjou, as well as Piero’s and Lorenzo’s close relationship with the French king Louis XI, who inexplicably refers to both Medici men as “cousin” in his intimate correspondence to them. Lorenzo’s banner also led me to Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII, very unexpectedly, as will be explored in their astonishing and completely unknown story in Book IV of this series. Connecting these elements, and watching them come together, is pure joy for me.

Space restrictions demanded that I edit elements of the highly complex Pazzi Conspiracy. I had no choice but to eliminate several villainous characters who were participants in the assassination of Giuliano and the attempt on Lorenzo. I apologize to history buffs who might find this element disconcerting. I chose, instead, to focus on those characters who I felt were the true core of the conspiracy, and I held fast to my determination to present the crime in all its horror through their actions. That such an appalling and cowardly attack was carried out during Mass in a cathedral, sanctioned by the pope and planned by an archbishop using priests as henchmen, is one of history’s great atrocities—and yet it is very rarely discussed or written about outside Medici biographies. I was struck by the irony of the professional killer acting as the voice of reason, which comes to us historically through Montesecco’s confession prior to his execution. And, of course, I was deeply moved by the account of the wounded Lorenzo’s courage in speaking to the mob and calling for calm in the hours following the murder of his beloved brother.

Renaissance scholars of both history and art will likely throw tomatoes at me for violating all kinds of academic codes, but let them. They can join the biblical scholars who scoff at my version of New Testament events. My role is to show the secret and human side of history, and it is the greatest possible occupation I can think of.

As Destino said, no man ever achieved greatness using just his mind. He must also use his heart. Thus I have endeavored to show you the heart of the Renaissance, and perhaps a little bit of my own.

And *of course* I have taken liberties. I did mention this was fiction, didn’t I?

I honor God and pray for a time when these teachings will be welcomed in peace and there will be no more martyrs.

KATHLEEN MCGOWAN

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While I worked on this book in Florence for several weeks over the last few years, I finished it in a quirky little cabin in the mountains outside Los Angeles. It is a house that my grandfather, BB Rhodes, built for my grandmother, Ethel Rhodes, as his own monument of love to her. It is a place of beauty and serenity, but the energy of familial love is so alive within its walls that writing there is the greatest of joys. I want to honor their memory with this book, as their spirits are an integral part of what I delivered. They were twin souls, as were my other set of grandparents, Katy Paschal and W. Joe Harkey, created for each other by God at the dawn of time. How blessed I was to have such influences in my young life.

The unequaled blessing these beautiful soul mates created was that of my parents, Donna and Joe Harkey, who have given everything they have to me—repeatedly—that I might thrive, grow, love, and experience life at all levels. Writing this book made me think about the importance of parents and grandparents, and all that mine have given me, so I dedicate this work to all of them, with much love and gratitude.

While researching this book, I became the devoted fan of Cosimo de' Medici, the great patron of the arts and humanity. He was truly a man without equal. But while writing him, I realized that I was drawing from life: much of Cosimo's character—his warmth, his humor, his brilliance—was informed by my literary agent and friend, Larry Kirshbaum. Larry is a Cosimo for our time, a supporter and defender of the arts and a champion for new voices in literature. Like Donatello and Lippi, I am utterly devoted to him and eternally grateful for his love and generosity.

My editor, Trish Todd, continues to share her patience, insight, and talent with every book I write, and I have to give her much credit for pushing me as hard as is necessary to ensure that these stories are told to their greatest advantage.

Throughout the incredible journey that was this book, where art and life blurred for me as they do for Maureen, I discovered an unparalleled muse in a Belgian-born author and researcher named Philip Coppens. Philip was intrepid, devoted, and unerringly dependable, sharing my love of the Renaissance and my passion for the mission of the Order. He brought my research, and subsequently this book, to

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Everything I create is for my children, that they may be inspired in their own journey, as they continue to inspire me throughout mine: so to Patrick, Conor, and Shane, know that you are my three most constant muses, who inspire everything I do.

I use Destino's process of infusion in the writing of this series of books. Although it translates differently in print than it does in paint, I find that it still works. The countless letters I receive from my readers around the world, indicating that my work makes them feel something new or exciting or beautiful, is proof of that. Thus, I want to acknowledge the strength and inspiration I receive from those letters in return, from the handwritten to the emails to the guest book posts on my website and Facebook. I cannot respond to each of them individually, but I read them all and they mean the world to me. So to my readers I give my heartfelt thanks. Please know that *you* make *me* feel something magical with every word you send to me. You are my collective muse, the one that keeps me working. Because of you, I have decided to expand what was once a trilogy into a longer series. There are so many more stories to be told, so many more emotions to be shared. Thank you all for continuing to inspire and support my journey.

Demori!
I remain.