

CHAPTER 1

The Botticelli Secret

Florence looks like gold and smells like shit.

The buildings are massive, gorgeous and epic. They are made of glowing gilded stone and silver marble. Yet the smells - animal dung, human waste, rotting meat and vegetables left in the gutter from market - would make a tanner blanch. In fact, the city is a mass of contradictions. It is built for giants, with the huge loggias, toothsome palaces and massy pillars, yet the Florentines are a tiny people and scuttle around the plinths like brightly dressed pygmies. The only citizens that truly fit such a scale are the statues that wrestle their stony bouts in the Piazza della Signoria.

Florence is beautiful and brutal. Her beauty is skin deep; underneath, the blood runs very near the surface. Wondrous palaces and chapels stand right next to the Barghello jail, a place worse than the Inferno. In every church, heaven and hell coexist on the walls. These opposite fates sit cheek by jowl on the ceilings too, divided only

Marina Fiorato

by the cross-ribs. In the dome of Santa Maria Del Fiore, our great cathedral, angels and demons whirl around together in a celestial fortune's wheel. Paradise and damnation are so close, so very close. Even the food is a contradiction. Take my favourite food, carpaccio; slabs of raw meat fair running with blood. It's delicious, but something had to die to make it.

On the streets, too, gods and monsters live together. I have no illusions. I am one of the monsters - Luciana Vetra, part-time model and full-time whore. The preachers spill poison about the likes of me from their pulpits, and decent women spit at me in the street. The Lord and the Devil compete for the souls of the Florentines, and sometimes I think the Devil is winning; if you enter the Battis-terro and look upon the mosaics of the Last Judgement, which bit do you look at first? Heaven, with the do-gooding angels and their haloes and hallelujahs? Or Hell, with the long-eared Lucifer de-vouring the damned? And if you were to read Signor Dante's Divina Commedia, would you start with Paradiso, with its priests and pope-holy prelates? Or the Inferno, where the skies rain blood and feckless nobles fry feet first? You know the answer.

So there was I; a jade and a jezebel, reviled by decent folk, touting one or more of the Deadly Sins on the street. A lost sheep. Sometimes though, a shepherd will come among us; one of the godly, selling salvation.

And that's how I met Brother Guido Della Torre.

It was not an auspicious meeting. He did not see me at my best. I was dressed in my best, to be sure, for I am

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always aware of the passing trade. But I happened to be sitting on the balustrade of the river, pissing into the Arno. Framed poetically by the saffron arches of the Ponte Vecchio looming behind. In fairness, it would not have been immediately obvious to the good Brother what I was doing, as my skirts were voluminous. But I had just come from Bembo's bed, was on my way to Signor Botticelli's studiolo, and the quantity of Muscat I had drunk for breakfast begged for evacuation.

Actually, I'm telling this all wrong – before we go onto talk about Brother Guido, and the right path, let me give you a glimpse of my old life, and the wrong one. Because unless you know about Bembo, and how I came to model for Signor Botticelli, you will never get to understand the secret, and the secret is the story. So lets go back to...the night before? No; no need to take you through all the depraved sex acts we committed for pleasure on Bembo's part and payment on mine. That morning would be time enough: Candelmaggio, the fifteenth of May, and the Florentine New Year. Spring - the right place to start.