

THE WINE TASTER

A Medici Murder

A Historic Mystery Novella

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The wine taster sampled Cosimo de Medici's food and wine to ensure it wasn't poisoned. But what if it was? What if the goblets were switched?

CHAPTER 1

Carlo Puglisi *could* be fooled, but he *was* no fool. To ensure he *wasn't* fooled, he poisoned rats. Procuring and testing poisons and their antidotes on his rats enabled him to observe and control the realities and subtleties of life and death. Death could be a painful, agonizing departure with spasms and convulsions before the body finally stiffened and succumbed. At most, a brief series of sharp, stabbing stomach pains, followed by a sudden bloating and ebbing away. Or it could creep upon a body slowly and easily as a calm drifting into a blissful sleep. So, which would it be this time, Puglisi thought as he approached his line of elevated rat cages. Quick and easy or slow and agonizing?

He opened the first pen, reached inside and lifted out Fortunato, a rat who had acquired his name a favorable draw of chance. He was the third rat captured when Puglisi first set his traps. He needed a control rat. One that would serve as a standard against which he could measure the effectiveness of the poisons and antidotes. Fortunato was to be that rat.

And so it was that Carlo Puglisi, Cosimo de Medici's wine and food taster, transferred Fortunato from his left hand to his right, then gently brushed the top of his head with his index finger.

How much of a role does the draw of luck and fortune play in our destinies, thought Puglisi? As a wine and food tester, he was a mere servant. In servitude to Cosimo de Medici, his master. With Cosimo's enemies out to kill his master by poison or by whatever means they could, it was Puglisi's sworn duty to warn him by tasting and dying in Cosimo's place if it came to that.

Savonarola, that religious firebrand, advocated death for those of Cosimo's ilk. To all those who had accumulated wealth beyond what Savonarola considered their "godly share." Cosimo employed Puglisi as his

barrier between this world and eternity. And thus, for Puglisi to protect Cosimo, he had to know his poisons. Their consistency. Their texture. Their composition. Their color. Their smell. All of it. But just as important, he had to know the antidotes should poison slip by his palate.

Why had life worked out that Puglisi was the wine taster and not Cosimo, his master, he thought as he picked a flea off Fortunato's hindquarters, squashed the tiny parasite between his thumb and forefinger, and flicked it off. Why not Puglisi atop the Florentine political ladder and Cosimo beneath? *Luck. Pure, dumb luck.* The coincidence and fortunes of birth spiraling up or down from that chance beginning. Given that nature's dice had rolled the better in Cosimo's favor, Puglisi accepted that he was stuck in place while his master had still further to climb. Geovanni de Medici, Cosimo's father, had bequeathed his eldest son a chain of lucrative banks that Cosimo quickly doubled and tripled in size and assets.

Yet, even more than his father, Puglisi thought as he carried Fortunato to a stone block once used to torture prisoners, Cosimo had the inborn talent to use those banks as seed money to sprout renewed growth and prosperity. And what did Puglisi himself have to offer in the way of talent? What was his talent? Nothing that weighed his purse down. Nothing that added up to riches. His only talent lay in his tongue. "You are good at tasting," he was told ever since he could remember. "Puglisi. Come over here and taste this," or "Puglisi. Try this sausage." Food from a questionable source that might be poisoned, tainted, rotting, or sickening they would take to his lips and wait to see if he got sick or died before they served it.

Now his master's food and wine taster, Puglisi looked down at Fortunato, a low-life rodent wiggling in his hand who had no choice of who or where he was. Likewise, Puglisi was an infant dropped off at the door of a foundling home, undoubtedly by a prostitute or a mistress with an

unwanted child. Those who cared for him soon discovered he could taste the sourness in goat's milk before anyone knew it began to turn. Even before he could speak, he would spit the milk out when they tried to force it on him.

“*Sour*” was the first word that earned him a nod and a smile. He was soon crowned as a “prince in the kitchen” who found himself sitting on a high, privileged stool in a warm corner where he ate as well as anyone. Far better than the other servants. The price for that position was occasionally vomiting and bedridden until he recovered. “*Thank heaven you didn't die this time!*” he repeatedly heard, although he was never sure if it was *his* welfare they were concerned with or their own.

At least he had a function and usefulness the other foundlings didn't have, so they kept him around for his talent before they sold him later to the highest bidder. To a wealthy banker who could afford to pay for his services. To Giovanni, Cosimo de Medici's father, who bought him as a gift to his son. He was a bought and paid for slave. Useful in a different way perhaps, he thought as he looked down at the rat wiggling in his hand, but no better than any other slave.

What would Cosimo de Medici do without his banks, money, and privileges? What would Puglisi be without his talent for tasting? It all came down to the luck of birth or natural talent and how each was put to use.

Puglisi sat Fortunato down between the slats of his exercise run. Suddenly loose and unexpectedly free, he spun in a dizzying circle, sniffing both sides of the run, then looked up to Puglisi as if uncertain how much freedom he was allowed. The wine taster flicked a sharp sting with his index finger on Fortunato's hindquarters, sending the rodent scurrying down the runway, swiping his tail against the sides, and banging his head on the wall at the far end. He sniffed the floor and turned in tight little circles.

Puglisi had forgotten to lay down a nibble of cheese, his normal reward at the end of a run. The wine taster reached into a dish. He pinched a bite of cheese, placed it between the slats, and tapped the wood with his fingernails.

Fortunato shook his head and gobbled up the cheese, then lifted his eyes and looked up. When the wine taster reached in to pat his head in affection, the rodent dug his teeth deep into Puglisi's palm.

"*Ahhhhh!*" Puglisi hollered as he hopped back. He shook his wrist to shake the pain away, then stepped forward and smacked Fortunato hard on his head. "*Ungrateful parasite,*" he muttered. He lifted the rodent by the scruff of his neck so he couldn't twist around and bite again, then hauled him across the room, tossed him in his cage and latched it shut.

Despite Fortunato's nasty disposition, he had come to Fortunato again. Puglisi might have strangled him if he hadn't needed to keep him alive to test his health and well-being against the other rats he poisoned.

The wine taster turned his back on Fortunato and moved to the fourth cage in the row. Its occupant – a no-name number seventeen -- lay upside down and stiff, his paws frozen in midair. The wine taster reached inside, lifted the animal out by its tail, and tossed him into a wooden barrel on top of several others. Then he reached back in the cage and slid out a small, flat dish of poisoned wine. He sat it on a side table next to an open journal marking his wine testing dates and results. Number seventeen's antidote mix, as with so many others, hadn't worked. Puglisi had to get the formula right. He had to be certain. If Cosimo ever drank poisoned wine, if Puglisi's failed in one of his tastings, he had to have an antidote ready. Death was final after all

CHAPTER 2

April 1410

One Year Earlier

Three hooded thieves, their faces hidden in shadow, huddled beneath the eave of the Santa Maria Novella Church. When the huge Duomo bell above them clanged the hour, just as the thieves had been informed, a lower door creaked open, the sound of the bell masking the noise.

The taller of the thieves turned his head and glanced in both directions to reassure himself that no one had followed or was looking their way. Then he nodded toward his two companions and led them across the cobblestones and through a partially open door into candle-lit darkness. As their eyes adjusted, a frocked monk stepped out of the shadows, his open palm stretched toward them.

The tall thief elbowed the thief to his right. That man -- shorter than the other two and broader in his hips -- reached inside a satchel strung across his shoulder. He lifted out a leather sack stuffed with florins and placed it in the monk's hand. "This way, then," the monk took the sack, turned, and led them toward a narrow arched tunnel lit with candles hung along the wall as far as they could see.

"Tread carefully," the monk looked over his shoulder and warned them. Traps lay everywhere, and these walls have ears and whisper secrets. Then he turned ahead and led them forward, the click of their sandals echoing off the cold stone walls as the putrid stench of rotting flesh filled their nostrils. When the tunnel ended abruptly, their path blocked by a huge, iron-hinged door, the monk stopped. He bent down, reached inside a cask, and handed each of them a candle he lit from the last one strung along the wall.

“Stay close,” he said. “Proceed through there,” as he nodded toward the door. “And keep close together, lest death grab your ankles and pull you in its clutches.”

CHAPTER 3

Giovanni de Medici leaned his elbows on his lending table as his next lender awaited an answer in a room that led to the street. That customer -- Phillipe Stephani, a wool merchant -- had requested a loan on his account to be repaid at the next shearing of his sheep in the fall.

“How much has he borrowed before?” Giovanni turned to his scribe and asked. “Is he regular in his payments?”

The scribe sorted through a sheaf of papers, pulled three out and set them aside, then laid one directly in front of him and ran a thick finger down the righthand column. “Sometimes regular,” the scribe said, pursing his lips. “Often, not.”

“And when he *does* pay,” Giovanni asked. “Does he pay in full?”

“Sometimes so. He is inconsistent in his payments.”

Giovanni nodded.

“Then we deny his request?” the scribe asked after a silence.

“To the contrary,” Giovanni said. “Ordinarily, but not so this time. In Stephani’s case, we accept. We lend.”

The scribe drew in his chin and raised an eyebrow.

“Tis this way,” Giovanni said. “Our loan business has been good. Most would agree, better than our competitors. And I agree that Stephani is irregular in his payments and does not always pay in full. Tis also true that whatever we take in interest and repayments determines the amount we have to lend to others.”

“There is only so much water in the well,” the scribe agreed.

“But let me ask you this,” Giovanni said. “How can we use the amount we have to do better than the rest with the other lenders?”

“Surely, not by lending to those irregular in their payments.”

“There are many ways to repay,” Giovanni said. “Florins, the coin of the realm, is only one.”

“I do not understand.”

“Stephani. That man who waits out there.” Giovanni glanced toward the closed door. “He is a known commodity. Florence is not big. All is known to everyone or easy to discover. Even beyond these walls, in the fields, secrets seep through the weeds like dew in the meadow. The truth is easy to discover for those who simply open their eyes and sniff the air.”

“I still...” the scribe began.

Giovanni raised a flattened palm to stop him. “Tis known that Stephani tends the most productive sheep that produce the best wool in season. Is that not known?”

“Tis true.”

“Thus, the quantity of his wares, once sheered, remains the same. That is fixed. But the price of wool varies depending on quality *and* availability. In lean times, what comes to market is worth far more than when the quantity is plentiful.”

“*Ahh,*” the scribe tightened his chin and said.

“Thus, we take his next sheering in payment and hold it in store

“Thus, if we hold the best, even in small quantities, and keep it in store until demand is high and supplies are lean, we make more than repaid in florins. Go fetch him,” Giovanni said, notching his forehead toward the door. “Have him come in.”

CHAPTER 4

The three thieves stepped through the tunnel door and closed tight behind them into a stonewall cavern low over their heads, their candles barely illuminating their way ahead as a stomach-churning stench of death seeped in their clothing, and a chorus of moans echoed off the walls.

An unidentified monk had accepted what he called their “generous donation” to the church’s coffers in exchange for directions to a hidden treasure. If that treasure mysteriously disappeared from the church’s underground vaults, the monk would simply claim he had no idea what had happened to it or what sort of nasty thieves might have spirited it away.

“*Blinking hell*” the tall thief hollered. The thief behind had stumbled into the leader's back when the leader suddenly stopped to stare wide-eyed at what lay before him. The thieves had all been told what to anticipate, but no warning could have prepared them for the horror of what lay before them. A staggered line of shriveled, broken bodies on their backs or curled up on their sides in fetal positions, their boney knees tucked to their chins as if trying to hold on to what little life remained. Others still alive wretched in uncontrollable spasms as if they had lost all control of themselves, and what remained of their souls attempted to squirm out of their useless bodies. A few candles sat on the ground between them, some still barely burning, others extinguished.

“*Move beyond,*” the second thief jabbed the leader in his back and whispered. “Before this evil creeps and spreads upon us.”

The tall thief, their leader, his curiosity unexpectedly overcoming his fear, held his candle out and stepped toward the nearest body. A man or a woman, dead or alive, he couldn’t be certain. He squatted, leaned close, and stared at a swollen face whose eyes stared back without any sign of expression or movement. It was as if whatever force had last moved those

eyes had locked them in place before departing. The victim's skin – a brownish-green squeezed together in tight layers -- seemed more like a frog's than a human's. The victim's belly, a *man's* belly, had puffed and bloated as a woman full with child. A trickle of blood drained from both corners of his mouth and caked on his cheeks as crusted slime covered his frock where he had expelled the last he had eaten.

The Black Death, the tallest thief knew. The grim reaper that feared no man, rich or poor, good or evil, honest or corrupt was upon them. The leader leaned back to distance himself. He suddenly realized he knew the man who lay before him. A cobbler whose daughter reported her father had been stricken with fever, chills, and searing pain as if his body had caught fire. A man in perfect health until his skin began to blister. Fearful, in near panic, his daughter had taken him to the Santa Maria Novella to huddle in with the others who had gone before him. To pray forgiveness for whatever sins he may have committed to cause his sickness and to die among the other sinners.

When the tall thief could no longer stand to be that close to death, he stood and turned away from the creeping carnage. He rejoined his comrades and led them through a smaller archway where they had been told to look for the end of the row of bodies. Suddenly further shaken by what he might find, concerned he might break an ancient bond with dire repercussions, the tall thief stopped dead in his tracks. He stiffened his backbone, gathered himself, and ducked low beneath an arched opening as the two others lowered their heads and followed.

They entered a room no bigger than a small anti-room with carved hollows dug along the wall. The monk who had directed them proclaimed, among other icons, that the vault held an ankle bone from one of Peter's early followers, a dried bloodstain of a fallen martyr, and the hardened,

preserved heart of Saint Agnosies. But the monk had warned them to take only what they had come for. “Tis is not a relic,” he had said. “Tis is wholly of another kind. The devil may punish you for taking that one, but the Lord will leave you alone.”

None of those relics, according to the monk, were certified or consecrated as genuine. All were held in secret, awaiting verification. Yet, none held any interest for these thieves. None matched the utility of a much older treasure they had come to claim. They had come for knowledge. For scribed memories that held a possible blueprint for Florence’s future. A younger generation of Florentines, the three thieves among them, had developed a keen interest in the ancient Greeks and Romans' beauty, power, and reasoned logic. They looked to what they thought held the key to Florence’s future. To what lay directly ahead of them inside and a small, ruby-encrusted chest that had halted the tall thief as soon he laid eyes upon it.

His breath quickened as he stepped forward and reached out. Could this be what Niccolo Niccoli, the thieves’ friend and older mentor, had directed them to? Niccoli had always coveted this treasure missing from his own collection of antiquities. He could barely contain himself when one of his informants had gotten word of its possible existence deep in the underground vaults and catacombs of the Santa Maria Novella Church. “This could be the guide we seek,” he told the three thieves at one of their clandestine meetings. “I am too old for thievery myself. But I know a monk, the one who informed me. Given the right incentive, he might lead you to it if you dare follow.”

Standing there in the reflected light of their candles, the thieves stared into each other’s eyes in a flickering expression of hope, trust, and disbelief that a map for the future of their beloved Florence lay before them.

The tall thief passed his candle to the thief to his right. He turned, inched forward, and held his palm above a dust-and-emerald encrusted chest. Then he drew a long breath and tilted back the lid.

He reached inside, lifted a scroll wrapped around a wooden peg, bound there with a leather strap. He handed the scroll to the thief behind him, who undid the strap and held the ends of the peg as the tall thief unrolled the scroll enough to reveal its title. *Plato's Republic*. One more piece of an ancient puzzle, the tall thief, 19-year-old Cosimo de Medici, thought. One more guidepost for Florence's rebirth. For its renaissance.

CHAPTER 5

Cosimo de Medici stumbling home, scrapped his shoulder against the side of the doorway as he hurried inside and lumbered up the stairs, bracing his hand against the wall to hold his balance and keep his feet pointed in the right direction. The effects of wine. One to two too many. He had lost count.

“*Ahhhh!*” he suddenly screamed, finding himself soaked and smelling of urine.

He raised his gaze to his father standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, a candle in his hand.

“*What have you done?*” Cosimo yelled. “*I smell like piss.*”

“You deserve far worse for pissing your life away, Cosimo’s father, Giovanni de Medici said. ‘The next time you stumble in like this, you will be drenched in piss *and* bed slop. Now, get up here and get out of those wet clothes. Get yourself dressed and sit with me. Tis past time you and I came to an understanding.’”

As Giovanni turned back into Cosimo’s room and set the candle on the table, Cosimo plodded up the stairs and entered. He doffed his soaked tunic in exchange for another, then plopped stoop shouldered on the edge of his bed, ashamed at his drunken antics and fearing his father’s wrath.

“We live in dangerous times,” Giovanni de Medici said, clutching his knees with his hands. “Danger lurches around us. The more we gain, the more we have to lose, and the more enemies we gather who would do us in for what we have. You are smart enough to deal with this. Certainly, cunning enough. Sneaky enough, some would say. But can you gather yourself enough to take over the business? Can you continue to grow what I have built? Can you protect it? Are you up to that?”

Cosimo shrugged.

“Liston carefully,” Giovanni directed his gaze at his eldest son. “Our main competitor, Giuseppe Gaccione, was found suddenly dead. Food poisoning, they say. A competitor lower in line to take over his holdings. But was it food poisoning or poison *in* his food?”

“Father,” Cosimo said, suddenly sober. “Are *you* in danger? Do you believe someone... ?”

“It is best to think I am. I have hired a food and wine taster as a precaution. He will taste your food as well. When you take over the business, I advise you to continue that precaution. We have come this far. Our *family* has. *I* have. Yet, we have much further to go and are just at the cusp of that. Our powerful enemies gather around like starving men smelling food to eat in front of them. We require as much protection as we can gather. We may even need the Lord on our side.”

“The papacy?” Cosimo raised his eyes and asked.

“So, you have heard then. You *do* take an interest.”

“I live in this house. I hear the talk. The negotiations.”

“And what exactly *do* you hear?”

“Only whispers. Not the details.”

“The details are these. The church in Rome is in chaos. And that makes fruit on the papal vine ripe for picking. We have a pope in Avignon who claims he is the true pope. Then we have another in Rome who claims the same. Word has come to me that the church council in Pisa has determined to resolve the dispute by disposing of both and electing someone new. Since neither of the claimants will accept the council’s authority or decision, an opening arises for someone of enterprise to reach up and pluck that hanging fruit.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“By using the rake we have, our money, to reach up and pluck it. We invest to see the right pope gets in. One who will choose our bank to place the church holdings. Any pope is powerless without the funds to support him and a place to keep those funds. We help the church support God by supporting the pope. One supports the other.”

“What is your plan then, Father? I know you have one. You always do.”

“Even the most ambitious plan is merely a scheme until brought to fruition.”

“And what be that plan?”

“Cossa.... Baldassare Cossa.”

“Cossa? That fool? Any plan that he is part of is bound to fail.”

“Not necessarily. Even a fool of an oxen can pull his load if harnessed and directed.”

“In what direction would you have this oxen pull?”

“I intend to support Cossa for pope. To *make* him pope.”

“But you are not a cardinal. You have no vote in the matter.”

“Not directly, perhaps. But I do have... I should say *we*... have the means to direct the vote. We have the money to buy as many votes as needed.”

“So, how do we put our own pope in place? Who will that help us?”

“Once Cossa is ordained as cardinal, and each of his fellow cardinals finds their pockets lined a little heavier, I believe we can predict that stream of white smoke from the Vatican’s chimney will declare Cossa, our hand-picked cardinal, as the new pope.

Cosimo raised his chin and looked directly at his father. “I still do not fully understand how that would help us in our banking business.”

“Tis simple,” Giovanni said. “We will have Cossa appoint our de Medici bank as the only officially approved Vatican bank as the keeper of most of the papal monies and accounts. With the church’s funds pouring in from everywhere in Europe, we will manage and lend it out as it would benefit the church and the other causes and entities we wish to support. The papal account will not only make us the richest bank in Florence, it will make us the most powerful anywhere. And the Medicis the most powerful banking family.”

“Which, as you say,” Cosimo added, “will also make us the most powerful enemies. Our family will be envied. Others will not take well to a sudden shift in power, especially when theirs shifts downward.”

“That is why you must take your responsibility seriously. It is time for you to straighten up and strengthen yourself for the struggles ahead.”

“I believe I am up to it,” Cosimo said.

Giovanni scowled. “You have the intelligence. The talent. But as to readiness? The steadfastness? You seem to have three pastimes. Wine, women, and an inordinate interest in Greco-Roman history.”

“Which could be useful if we have the money to employ that history as a model for Florence’s future, Cosimo said. “As a means to create a renewal, a rebirth of sorts.”

“And as to the wine and women?” Cosimo’s father inquired. “What of them?”

“Pleasures of the flesh. Mere distractions. Something for which to pray for forgiveness in confession.”

CHAPTER 6

1411

One Year Later

“Guido,’ Cosimo glanced up and asked as his father’s wine taster slid into a seat next to him in the massive frescoed Florence Duomo. “What at you doing here? What brings you to church in the afternoon?”

“Age,” Guido said, holding his hand close to his mouth as if holding back a cough as he sat. “Increasingly, I feel the presence of God sneaking up behind me. I like to sit in God’s presence to review the sins I will soon have to pay for. We both grow old, your father and I. Our time and presence will soon have passed to you.”

“The fact that my father is still alive at all may be due to you, his wine taster.”

“Perhaps tis so,” Guido agreed. “I have drunk a lot of wine and eaten a lot of meals and neither of us has died of it. If I keep that up, we shall both die a natural death. Which is why I was hoping to see you. Your father has asked me to find a replacement.”

“For what? For the tasting? Surely, you are not *that* old. You will be with us a while.”

“Your father always thinks ahead. That is why his banks have always grown into larger banks. When he sees an opportunity for growth, he waits for the right moment to pounce upon it. Yet, neither he nor I will live forever. Your father will soon lend money in heaven, and I will taste the wine.”

“You suspect there will be poison in heaven?” Cosimo asked.

“It should not matter. Since I am already dead, I cannot die twice. Thus, I will drink for the pleasure of it only. For the taste.

“Do you think all are equal in heaven?” Cosimo asked. “If so, you and my father will drink together as equals.”

“If that be so, death will hold that advantage. Your father and I have come to know and like each other well all these years. I suspect we will be friends who stand on equal ground. Yet, while I am still on earth, I will attend my earthly duties. Your father has asked me to find an apprentice to mentor. Someone of your age. Someone I can teach the ways of tasting on your behalf when I am gone.”

“I have come to know you myself, Guido. I don’t look forward to losing you or my father.”

“We all take our turn in line. Meanwhile, as your family’s assets and influence increase, the danger to his life and yours increase. It is even more important for you to safeguard now than it has been in the past.”

“Have you found someone to mentor?”

“I believe I have. A Carlo Puglisi. A grown foundling who seems to have a native tongue for the task. But what of you? What brings you to church this day? Surely not my reason. Not to prepare yourself to meet your maker.”

“Perhaps to seek absolution for my own sins. I have come to meet two thieves. Two *other* thieves, I should say. I include myself among them.”

“Thieves? What is it you plan to steal?”

“Reformed thieves, to be honest. Just the one time. We formed a league of thieves, plus our mentor Niccolo Niccoli. We are all ambitious. Dreamers, really. We are keen on revitalizing Florence using the ancient Greeks and Romans as our models. We set out to collect anything and everything related. Niccoli paid a monk to show us the way to a hidden treasure, a copy of Plato’s Republic, which we stole and kept, hoping it might contain the seeds to plant for Florence’s future.”

“That is an idea your father has always supported,” Guido said. “I have heard him speak of it.”

“He has used his resources to that end, as I will when it comes my time. The family business already brings in more than we can spend. Why not use some of that to contribute to the beauty and well-being of all? Why *not* a rebirth of Florence? A renaissance?”

“A longer project than I have time to see in my life,” Guido said.

“You may see some. We plan to start right here,” Cosimo said, nodding toward the altar. “Right here in this church. The Duomo’s dome has never been finished. Rain pours through that hole like God’s tears. No one has yet figured out how to span that gap without the roof collapsing on praying heads beneath.”

“And you know the answer? You know a way?”

“No one does. But the time is past due to find one. That breach is a scar on the city. I plan to hold a contest. Perhaps, with enough reward and incentive, someone can figure one out.

CHAPTER 7

August 1412

Fourteen months later

“Are you truly ready for this?” Lorenzo de Medici, Cosimo’s six-year younger brother, asked Cosimo as he straightened his silk tunic and examined himself in a full-length mirror.

“Ready for *what?*” Cosimo asked, facing forward to view his ankle-length, brightly colored undergarment topped with a wide-sleeved satin jacket and silver lace stockings extending to his ankle-length boots with pointed shoes.

“For what awaits you, brother. For marriage. Your future.”

“Nothing much has changed. My future still awaits. At twenty-two, tis only marriage that changes. What do you think of my wedding suit?” Cosimo turned to Lorenzo and asked.

“I think tis not somber enough for a funeral nor outlandish enough for a jester. You strike the middle ground.”

“What is your view of marriage?” Cosimo inquired. “Do you see it as a farce or a sentence of death? To the restriction of pleasure down a single line?”

“As a commitment, I should say yes to that,” Lorenzo said. “But to what end, I am not sure. The concept escapes me. Where do *you* stand on the issue? How do you see marriage? Why *are* you doing this?”

“Practical considerations,” Cosimo said, turning sideways to examine himself from another angle. “Despite her family’s recent banking losses, they still have important links and influence through their banks in Rome. Those connections could easily help us expand. As to present other

considerations, she brings a dowry that includes the de' Bardi Palazzo and its surrounding estate. A beautiful view of Florence from there.

“And, as to that family’s banking losses,” Lorenzo said. “Bad management, I have heard. They are bad at what we are good at. Using money as seeds to grow more, they lend to those with names and titles but no assets to repay.

“The de' Bardi Palazzo will give us an immediate place to move in and live,” Cosimo said as he faced the mirror again to straighten his collar. “Without further expense.”

“*Without* further expense?” Lorenzo tightened his forehead. “With *your* taste in art and sculpture? With *your* extravagance? I know you. You will add to the place whatever you find.”

“Tis true,” Cosimo turned away from his mirror and admitted. “There might be some expense to that regard.”

“And what of your other issue?” Lorenzo asked.

“My *other* issue? *What* other issue?”

“Your entanglements. Your liaisons, if that’s what you call them? The fairer sex.”

“I simply call them friends.”

“Friends of the bedchamber?”

“Not exclusively. The bedchamber alone is not enough to satisfy all a man’s appetites. There is also the matter of company. Stimulation. Good conversation.”

“And the countess does not provide those?”

“You have met her, brother. You know her well enough. What is your opinion on that score?”

“I give you, she is neither the brightest nor most handsome of choices. Yet, she is neither the least of them.”

“We are a practical family. Our father has taught us the importance of business considerations. What would you say of her as an asset on the business side? On the possibility of acquiring another bank in Rome in our growing numbers? How would you consider her family benefit in that regard?”

“Well, if that truly be the case,” Lorenzo said. “Then I would consider her good for business if she stayed *out* of business. If she stays at home and tends her duties there. As you yourself have said of her, she has few interests beyond what lies immediately before her. The gardens should give her abundance to occupy her time and interest.”

“Tis not her fault entirely,” Cosimo said. “Her father, who could have well afforded her more, has denied her an education and even access to his library. She has little knowledge to exchange in conversation or in any other way. Continue, though. What else would you say of her?”

“I would say she has a quiet nature. That she giggles a lot and engages little unless spoken to.”

“Anything else?”

“How much do you seek?”

“Whatever you have to offer.”

“As to appearance, she is chubby-cheeked and rather plain.”

“Anything good to say in her favor?”

“She is a woman of substance.”

“Do you mean of *chubby* substance?”

“I would say, hefty. She can clearly pull her own weight. So then, brother. What does it all add up to?”

“To a marriage of convenience,” Cosimo said as he turned back to his mirror. “We both get what we need. She will remain at home and stay

out of the family business. I will take care of that, and she will live a life of luxury.”

“And as to your bedchamber liaisons? Your conversational friends?”

“They shall remain on the side. My wife will do her duty as she sees it. She will bear us children to pass the business on and to carry on our name. What more can be expected?”

A rap on the door interrupted them. When Lorenzo crossed the room and opened it, a young boy leaned his head in. “Is the husband to be ready to receive his bride?”

“I believe he is,” Lorenzo said, glancing over his shoulder. “As ready as he ever will be.”

CHAPTER 8

May 1433

21 Years Later

“Cosimo de Medici,” an armed guard burst into Cosimo’s residence and loudly announced. “You are to come with us. You are under arrest.”

“Under arrest? On whose orders?”

“On the orders of the council.”

“On what charge?”

“High treason.”

“Allow me to guess. This is the work of Albizzi, the council's chairman these days.”

“He voted with the rest.”

“I should imagine he *led* the rest.”

“Imagine as you wish. You are to come with me.”

The lead guard and two others marched Cosimo out the door and through the narrow streets of Florence, two more guards following behind. But Cosmo had powerful friends in Florentine, those his father had before his father died, and those he had made on his own in the banking business. But he also had his enemies, those he had inherited and those he had made on his own.

As he turned a sharp corner, a charwoman sweeping her doorway cocked her head in his direction, then quickly turned away when she caught him looking. He well knew that as many feared him as embraced him. “Blend in when you can,” his father had always advised. “Avoid extravagance in public. Those with less are envious. Envy and animosity often turn to hate. Being loud and ostentatious paints you as a target.”

In his palaces, in his hose and a velvet jacket, he stood out. Outside in the streets, he dressed in the simple clothing of an ordinary Florentine. Somewhat cleaner perhaps, but nothing outlandish.”

The guard led Cosimo into the Piazza della Signoria, following a path that led directly to political power and the weight of authority. Rinaldo Albizzi -- shorter in stature than his high place on the council would seem to suggest – awaited Cosmo at the foot of the landing just inside the door of the Palazzo Vecchio, a not so subtle grin of satisfaction on his face. “So,” Albizzi said. “You’ve acquired an escort this time. You usually have an air about you as if you owned the town *and* the council.”

“I take it this all your doing?” Cosimo said

“Hardly alone. If it’s anyone’s doing, it’s yours.”

“You won’t get away with it,” Cosmo said as he passed. “This won’t last long.”

“We shall see, won’t we,” Albizzi called after Cosimo as he and one of the guards followed Cosimo up the winding steps. “He who rises high has

far to fall.”

“Where are you taking me?” Cosmo turned to his guard and asked.

“All the way,” the guard said. “To the top.”

“To the tower?”

“Those are my orders.”

With two hundred and thirty-three steps ahead to the top, Cosmo had ample time to consider his dire situation. How should he proceed? Break and run? He could turn suddenly and surprise the guard, kicking him hard and rolling him backward down the steps. But Albizzi would have anticipated that. Other guards would await him at the foot of the steps. They had caught him off guard. There would be no immediate escape.

CHAPTER 9

2 Days Later

May 1433

Cosmo found himself locked up in a small room atop the Palazzo Vecchio's huge tower, confined to an area that allowed room for a single wooden table, two roughhewn chairs, one stool, and a bed of leather straps.

He had been held there for two days now. He knew he had friends who would be looking after his welfare and seeking his release, but where were they? What had taken them so long? Had they been threatened or bought off? Paid to keep their hands off and their tongues in their mouths? Money too often bought a shifting loyalty. It was, too often, the *only* reason for loyalty. Once allegiance could be purchased, it was more a question of price than steadfastness. Cosimo knew how that strategy worked. He employed it himself. Some say, better than most. He learned from his father and perfected it further.

Just as he slumped at the table, he heard a key in the latch and looked up as the door creaked open. Puglisi, his wine and food taster, entered with a tray of food balanced in his hands. His lunch. At least they allowed him his meals. They afforded him that. As Puglisi stepped in and crossed the room, a uniformed guard stepped in behind him to watch and listen.

"It is good to see you, Puglisi," Cosmo said. "You're the only sign of life I see of late, other than those I watch strolling in the Plaza out that narrow portal. What is it they say of me out there?"

"They are uncertain," Puglisi said as he sat down a tray of guinea fowl, leeks, pork jelly, and beetroot. "They don't know what to say."

"At least they allowed me to eat from one of my own kitchens. "Why do you suppose they allow that?"

“If you were poisoned in captivity,” Puglisi said. “Your known enemies would be blamed. They prefer to have you hang by the verdict from the council. Most are anxious and confused. They keep their opinions to themselves. They fear being heard and accused of being on the wrong side.”

“And which do they believe *is* the wrong side?”

“That changes so often, tis hard to know. They wonder what it is you have done to displease the authorities. The *current* authorities. The other banking families.”

“Tis a simple matter,” Cosimo said. “I have *outdone* them in business. *That* displeases them.”

“But you have been generous in providing for Florence. In commissioning art and beauty in piazzas in public places. All those fountains and the statues are your doing.”

“Flaunting my wealth, they would say. That angers them further. I try to keep much of that to myself.”

“Why should you do so? You have earned it.”

“Have I?... What have I done to earn it? I simply move money around to make more while keeping a portion for myself. Others do the work that earns that money.”

“Which they often could not do without a banking loan.”

“Say what you will. You see the result. Here I am. Locked up. Awaiting trial.”

“What *will* happen to you? What will be the outcome of all this?”

“What is it you hear? What do they say of that in the piazzas?”

“Not much in the piazzas. But I hear from those who serve in the kitchens and the stables. Those who hear through the walls. We are so far beneath them, they ignore our presence. They speak freely, but

we *are* there. We do hear. It is in our interest to know what they are up to and how it might affect us.”

“So what *do* you hear then, Puglisi? What do those walls speak of me?”

“Many think you are bleeding the city. That much of what you take in fees for loans goes in your own pockets or to lavish your other places.”

“There is some truth in that,” Cosimo admitted. “I have expanded the business beyond what my father started. Branch banks in other cities now fall under my wing. Milan and Rome, and of late in Paris. Tis simply business. I move amounts around to make the best loans and investments as the needs arise. But much of it remains in Florence and is put to good use here. I walk these streets as much as anyone. It has always been my intent to invest in art, sculpture, and architecture and to expand their presence in the very town in which I live. To make the best of what we have and add to that, so long as my business profits allow. It all comes back in that way.”

Puglisi nodded toward the food tray. “You must eat. They require me to take back what is left. They trust neither of us.”

“Take it then. I have lost my appetite. There’s not much room to stretch in these quarters, let alone walk about to get some exercise. There is little to do and too much time to think... Take the tray with you. Perhaps later.”

“I shall bring your next at sunset, then.” As Puglisi stepped forward, his back to the guard standing inside the door, he opened a fist and passed a note to Cosmo, who quickly concealed it at his side. As soon as the wine taster and the guard left and the door snapped shut and locked, Cosmo opened the note and read it.

“Be patient. You have friends. A plan is being formed.”

CHAPTER 10

Rats slithered and scurried around in their underworld, Carlo Puglisi, Cosimo's food and wine taster, thought as he left his tiny quarters on the bottom level of Cosimo's Vecchio Palace. They mostly creep unnoticed in the dark except for cats that enjoy the taste of their flesh or the dogs fool enough to chase them until they get snouts bitten and scamper away in pain, their tails tucked between their legs.

Puglisi rounded Florence's Baptistry and turned the corner onto Via dell' Ariento, his shadow overwhelmed by buildings along both sides as he made his way between the Vecchio market's vendor stalls and wagons that stood upon the very footprint of what was once a Roman Forum. He skirted a group in a heated discussion in front of a baker's stall, the aroma of fresh bread intermingling with a neighboring fish monger's ware whose catch had already developed a stench for lingering too long. Two stalls down, a silver-haired man with a curved cane stood in front of a vegetable cart, a green apple raised in one hand, a red in his left, apparently weighing the value of what he could afford against what he had in his purse.

Puglisi well understood that fight. He himself would have faced that dilemma had he not been employed by one of Florence's wealthiest men who allowed his wine and food taster to sample what was intended for his master. Others, not of such good fortune, had to tap the side of their leather purse to determine what they could or could not afford. It was true that Puglisi had started his life as a foundling. Nonetheless, a foundling who *had* been found. One who had a talent he could trade for a livelihood. Others in that orphanage had not been so lucky. Unlike Cosimo, none had been born sucking a silver spoon paid for by a family of wealth and influence.

“*Puglisi!*” someone called his name over the din of the market. “*Here... Over here!*”

He stood and stretched his neck to see Domenico Montanaro, Rinaldo Albizzi’s chief stable hand, wave his arm above the crowd as Puglisi weaved through a group of a half dozen haggling over the price of a bale of Florentine wool, a commodity that stood at the base of Florence’s economy.

“What brings you out to market this day?” Puglisi asked his friend.

“Apples,” Domenico said, glancing along the row to the fruit stands across the way.

“*Apples?... You are neither the cook nor this cook’s help.*”

“Tis true, but I do feed the horses. My master’s favorite stallion loves his apples. If his horse is disgruntled and rebellious, so is Albizzi for his morning ride. A good apple keeps everyone happy. But there is news. Bad news, I’m afraid. I was about to look for you to warn you. To try and save you.”

Puglisi stepped back and drew his chin in. “*Save me? Save me how? For what?*”

“I heard them talk. Our first loyalty is to each other.”

“What is it then? What *did* he hear?”

“My master, Albizzi, is breeding a mare. The breeding gets him as excited as his stallion. He gathers his friends to watch as I lead the stallion around a mare in heat until the stallion gets a good wind of it and mounts. After he humps and settles back again, his friends are all so drunk on wine they forget I am there while I cool the horses down. They foolishly conspire loud enough for me to overhear. Your name came up.”

“*My name? A wine taster? They speak of me?*”

“I stepped back far enough to disappear but still listen.”

“And what did you hear?”

“I am not surprised they chose you. But who else *could* they choose? Who else could get close enough to Cosimo that he would trust? If they have poison in mind, they know it would have to pass your tongue. That is your stock and trade. That is what you do. Poison is your specialty.”

“Tis *not* my specialty. I simply study its nature and its use, and not for killing the likes of men. For the killing of rats and vermin that eat the grain and nibble at the foodstuffs or scurry about frightening the women out of bed at night with their nightgowns pulled up, stooping over their slop pots.”

Domenico looked about to see if there was anyone he recognized, then turned back to Puglisi and leaned in closer. “Cosimo,” he whispered. “Your master is still in the tower, is he not? Is it well known you bring his food.”

“They allow that.”

“If poison be their means, they intend for you will be its carrier.”

“But how could that happen? I *am* the taster. He trusts me. It is my job to protect him.”

“They know that. That’s why your master would drink it. He does trust you.”

“Then how do you suppose they plan to slip it by without my notice?”

“That, I do not know. They did not say. They caught me listening.”

Puglisi lowered his head and thought for a second. “But if he *was* poisoned in the tower with Albizzi’s guards watching over him, would not that point the finger right back at Albizzi? All would know it was he who did it.”

“They have conceived a plan for that as well. His death in the tower would not be the end of it. When Albizzi’s guards find him lying there, they intend to carry his body up one level and toss him off the tower. His

mangled, broken body, splattered on the cobblestones below, will not be closely examined. They will simply say he overpowered one of the guards to make his escape. That he knew he was guilty. That he flung himself to death to avoid the inevitable.”

“No one would believe that.”

“Many wouldn’t. Perhaps most. There would always be doubt. But Albizzi and his friends would be fully in charge again with no competition. The deed would be done.”

CHAPTER 11

When next the lock clicked and the tower door squeaked open, Cosimo expected to see a council member come to announce the council verdict. Guilty, no doubt, since why would they lock him up if they did not intend that outcome? Or, if not a council member, then a contingent of guards to swiftly carry out an undeclared verdict by hauling him one more level up in the tower, tossing him over the edge, and having done with it. But the man who entered was someone of an entirely different ilk. An authority from a totally different quarter. Cosimo stared in surprise at Cardinal Giuseppe Antonelli, fully garbed in his red cap and cardinal's cape. And oddly, for the first time since Cosimo had been confined, the guard who let the cardinal in closed the door without remaining outside to listen and report.

"Father," Cosimo rose from his chair and said. "Have you lost your way? 'Tis true, you are closer to heaven up here, but you are the last I expected to see climbing all those stairs. How did you manage them?"

"With some difficulty," the cardinal said, holding his hand to his breastbone. "May I sit to catch my breath?"

"Of course," Cosimo said, sliding into another hard, wooden chair close to the table. "Not to grant a final absolution, I hope."

"Sadly, it may come to that," the cardinal began. "But I bring better hope. I have personally spoken to the pope on the gravity of your situation. I believe I speak on behalf of his Holiness when he prays that all this may be resolved."

"And why would his Holiness take any interest in this?" Cosimo asked. "Why would he choose to be personally involved?"

"He is concerned for all his flock."

"Why this one in particular? Why me?"

The cardinal shrugged. “Your family is well known and has long been. He knows of your family and all that you and your father have contributed to Florence and to Rome.”

“You mean the *church* in Rome. On our bank that safeguards much of the holy funds.”

“I freely admit,” the cardinal said. “That God’s light tends to shine brighter upon those who support the church’s endeavors that benefit all. The funds you hold allows his Holiness to focus on more important matters. On matters of the spirit.”

“The funds I hold benefit all.” Cosimo agreed.

“Not the least, indeed, the banker who holds and loans those funds. You yourself.”

“What benefits the bank, then benefits those who use the bank.”

“Your bank and others,” the cardinal said. “The pope prefers to spread his wealth to help others.”

“Other banks.”

“Many banks in Rome have contributed gifts and loans to further God’s good work. If the Medici bank, *your* bank, were to fail due to the absence of leadership, or through some unforeseen event, those other banks, your competition, would rush in to fill that void.”

“I see,” Cosimo said. “Yet, under *good* leadership, under mine and my father’s before me, those funds have been well managed and earned a good profit for the church.”

“They have. For *you* and the church.”

“In which case, if you have the pope’s ear through myself as his emissary, I’m sure you could use his good graces to influence the Florentine council in the matter at hand. Your life or death. If your leadership should continue, the church might do even better if you took a little less on your

side, on the bank management side, so that God's good work can be increased even further."

"I concede that would be quite generous of me."

"If not, then perhaps some of what you have at your discretion could be used to move me up in line when it comes to your turn to meet your maker."

"And perhaps that inevitable meeting could be delayed?" Cosimo asked.

"With my favorable report, I am sure the pope would be even more fervent in directing his prayers and influence in your direction. Who knows? God works miracles. The right prayer from the right source might even loosen the rope you find around your neck."

CHAPTER 12

As usual, Carlo Puglisi, Cosimo de Medici's food and wine taster, sat at the foot of the kitchen table in the lower-level cookhouse of the Riccardi Palazzo. As was his habit, he watched the cook and the cook's help prepare the noon meal so he could carry it to Cosimo in his tower cell. Quail stew, this time. But, on this occasion, Puglisi had taken added precautions. He had learned from Domenico Montanaro, Albizzi's chief horseman, that Albizzi planned to end Cosimo's tower confinement by killing him and that he intended to employ poison as his method.

Puglisi had taken the added precaution to ask the cook and the cook's help to each take a bite, and chew and swallow a small portion of each ingredient – carrots chosen from a bunch that Puglisi had randomly selected from the garden himself, a potato from the potato stack, and saffron from a batch of three. He had been warned of the plot but not how they intended to pursue it. If poison be their means, then what would be their method? How

would they slip past what Puglisi was charged to detect and prevent? Whoever was responsible for Cosimo's death, if poison was suspected, the blame would fall full-force upon Puglisi's head, knowing his very reason for employment. He would be the one who let it slip by. Had he *not* tasted the food before he served it? Had he *not* drunk the wine? Perhaps he had been paid to poison his master. Perhaps he had his own reason for killing the man he was charged to protect? To blame him, if the deed were done by poison, would deflect the blame from those who did the deed.

Puglisi leaned his elbows on the table as he watched a cook's helper shave a carrot and bit an end off. He never entirely trusted the cook, the cook's helper, or any of the dozens of others required to tend, clean, and operate an eighty-room palazzo. All were screened, and all were known, but many came and went. Quarters were provided but little in compensation. Pay for loyalty was rampant when there was little pay to go around. If Puglisi be Cosimo's shield, it was his duty to strengthen and harden that shield.

As he normally would, he poured the wine he had selected into two flat-bottom clay goblets, then drank as he ate a portion of the lunch prepared for Cosimo. His duties always meant he ate well, so long as he was willing to accept that one of those meals might mean his demise. If he hadn't collapsed dead on the floor within an hour after eating, he covered the food tray to keep the meal warm as he balanced it out the door and across to the tower.

CHAPTER 13

Satisfied that the food prepared for Cosimo's lunch was neither tainted nor poisoned, at least not in sufficient quantity to sicken Puglisi, he carried the tray to the tower portal, where a burly-bearded guard raised a hand to stop him and nodded for him to set his tray down while a second guard stirred the stew with a knife in search of a weapon. Finding none, they ordered Puglisi to turn around while a second guard patted him down for weapons. That ritual completed, the bearded guard unlocked the lower door and followed as Puglisi balanced his tray up the winding stairs. He stopped twice to catch his breath before reaching the top, then stepped aside for the tower guard to unlatch and open the door, then backed away to allow Puglisi through.

"Ahh. my friend," Cosimo glanced up from his table. "I'm glad to see you. You are the only life I see in this god-forsaken place beyond these guards, and they are charged not to speak to me. Perhaps the news is so bad they do not wish to convey it."

"All news is bad as long as you are locked up," Puglisi said as he carried the tray across, sat it down, removed the cover, and uncorked the wine.

"Quail stew," Cosimo examined it and said. "I eat as well here as I do in the palazzo. I only wish the accommodations rose to that level. Tell me," he glanced up and said. "How is the Contessa managing through all this? What do you hear of her?"

"Her maids say she frets. That she is at her wit's end as to what to do."

"Pass the word back to her to watch after our son. He may be our best hope for our family's future."

“Do not speak of such,” Puglisi shook his head and said. “You have plenty of future ahead,” he added as Cosimo used his spoon to break up a piece of floating meat. “They don’t allow me anything sharp. I might stab a guard and make my escape. Neither a fork. Perhaps, I could poke an eye out. I have not yet determined how to employ a spoon as a weapon.”

As Puglisi watched, Cosimo ate a bit of potato, then another, then clinked his spoon on the side of the plate and lifted his wine goblet. “I drink to you, then,” he said, holding it toward his wine taster. “My one and only confinement friend. A most loyal servant who has attended me faithfully all these years. Who still keeps me alive whilst others decide if I am worthy of life.”

As Cosimo touched the goblet to his lips, Puglisi leaped forward and knocked it from his grasp, sending the goblet crashing to the floor and spattering wine across the wall.

“*What possessed you!*” Cosimo bolted up and exclaimed.

“That goblet,” Puglisi said, staring at the broken pieces. “It is not the one I carried over. It *looks* the same, but not quite. The clay around the rim is different. *Was* different.”

“But how...?” Cosimo raised both hands and asked.

“Ask him,” Puglisi said, glancing back toward the guard. “The only time that goblet was out of my sight was when I turned for him to search me. To pat me down.”

CHAPTER 14

Carlo Puglisi sprung up in bed in his tiny quarters in Cosimo's servant's quarters. The massive Palazzo della Signoria bell had clanged to summon the voting members of the Parlamento to gather in the square to cast their votes to approve or disapprove Cosimo's verdict of guilty or innocent of crimes against the city and, if guilty, to determine the sentence. But Puglisi knew the uneven jury, stacked with Albizzi supporters, had been charged with finding Cosimo guilty of high financial crimes against the city – for employing Florentine money for his own enrichment or for the betterment of other cities – crimes for which they could recommend banishment or death by hanging.

But Puglisi also knew that Cosimo still had powerful friends who owed him allegiance, and rumors circulated that some on the jury felt that Albizzi already wheeled far too much power and influence. It was thought they might vote as much against Albizzi as for leniency for Cosimo. Whatever the outcome, the sentence would commence immediately upon affirmative by those Parlamento members eligible to vote. The response of those summoned would hold the key to the outcome. Unable to vote himself, as were all those his station, Puglisi rushed to fetch his friend Domenico Montanaro whom he knew would wish to be present when the votes were counted and the results proclaimed.

“Look up ahead,” Domenico stopped short and said. “Do you see them? Armed guards. Albizzi's men. They are only allowing a few of us to pass.”

“Which few do you suppose,” Puglisi asked, catching his breath. “Perhaps only those who favor Albizzi's desired outcome.”

“Then, we go around the back way,” Domenico nodded over his shoulder.

They rushed behind the square and approached it from the riverside.

“Blocked ahead as well,” Domenico said, holding an arm out to stop Puglisi. “All ways are blocked. They only allow a certain few to enter. They have stacked the deck against your master.”

CHAPTER 15

A deadly quiet filled Cosimo's tower cell after the clanging of the bell, calling all who could vote to accept or reject the jury's verdict of innocence or guilt, banishment or execution. After pacing enough to wear a circle on the floor, Cosimo heard a key in the door and turned to see his younger brother, Lorenzo.

"*Cosimo!* Their votes are cast," he announced as he rushed across to embrace his brother. "Your life has been spared." He clutched Cosimo's shoulders with both hands as if to hold him steady, then stepped back at arm's length to look him in the eye. "But the news is not *all* good. They have found you guilty and approved banishment."

"So be it," Cosimo said, breathing a long sigh of relief. "It seems we still have a few friends among those who voted."

"Friends who directed their votes in the direction the money flowed."

"How much did it cost us?"

"Our favorite council president, Francesco Gonfaloniere, accepted a thousand florins the moment it was offered it. We got off cheap with him. We had in mind to pay him ten times that amount. In the end, he didn't vote. He declared himself sick and unable, then appointed another we were able to bribe."

"So, we had all we needed, then," Cosimo rubbed his hands together and said. "Enough to slide by."

"Not quite enough. We marshaled other resources, quietly raising troops to secure your release if it came to that, then we made our enemies aware of our efforts. And then, beyond that," Lorenzo said as he raised his eyes toward the ceiling, "it seems we've had help from above. The Vatican

intervened. His Holiness sent a message that he would look with disfavor upon a penalty of death.”

“Banishment then.”

“Ten years for you, five for me. All our close relations, our cousins and their families, permanently excluded from holding public office.”

“What do you make of it all, Lorenzo? Did we win or lose?”

“We won. There *is* no life unless life goes on. We still have our banks in other cities. They could not touch those. We are free to pack up and leave. That is, if we can get by those who would still stab us in the back as we pass through the gate.”

CHAPTER 16

14 Months Later

September 1434

One of Cosimo's servants burst into Puglisi's tiny room and shouted. "Have you heard the news? A courier has arrived. Your master has been summoned back to Florence after just over a year of banishment. He says the city has turned against Albizzi and his followers. His usury laws and oppressive taxes were roundly hated by the guilds and merchants alike. And, as if that weren't enough to turn the tide against him, they say he has mismanaged the church's money. Even the pope has once again interceded on your behalf. Apparently, God has taken your side against the likes of Albizzi. Your light shines brighter in the mirror of past reflection. It is said that Florence will welcome you back with open arms. With hugs and kisses even, were they able to drag you off your horse and pin you down.

And thus, in the year of Our Lord, the 28th day of September 1434, Cosimo and his entourage, Puglisi riding behind in line, passed through Florence's San Frediano gate to a cheering throng who cheered and waved as he passed. To Puglisi, Cosimo's long-serving wine taster, it felt as though his master were returning from a glorious victory in battle. In a sense, he was. He *had* won a victory over his enemies by waiting them out. But what next for Cosimo? What would be the fruits of his victory? Cosimo would have a plan to turn the rushing tide in his favor. Revenge or reconciliation, in life and business, always a trade-off.

CHAPTER 17

Two Years Later

Early Winter, 1436

“Someone is waiting to see you,” Carlo Puglisi, Cosimo’s food and wine taster, announced after entering with a dessert tray carefully balanced in his hand.

“It’s late. Who can it be? I have no appointments.”

“He begs it’s important. That you will want to see him.”

“Undoubtedly business, then,” Cosimo glanced up and said. “Ask him to wait until I finish eating.”

“He is not alone. Another waits with him.”

“He brings company?” Cosimo clasped his hands and asked.

“Company that may spark your interest. Beautiful company. Young and beautiful.”

“Leave the dessert and ask them to wait in the sitting room. I shall meet them there when I’ve finished.”

What sort of young, beautiful surprise could it be, Cosimo wondered as Puglisi sat the tray down, turned, and left. Cosimo suspected the usual temptation of a beautiful woman to ply more business from him. He had been living and working in Rome for eight months now. His wife, the countess, had remained in Florence, caring for their child. A son, Piero, the future hope for what Cosimo’s father had created and Cosimo had expanded.

He was in no hurry to meet his uninvited guests. The longer a business interest waited, the more impressed and pliable they tended to be when matters got down to business. In banking, first impressions raised the value. Whatever was offered beyond that seemed worth more.

He finished his dessert, then stood and passed through the back hall to enter the sitting room from the rear garden side. As soon as he opened the door and stepped inside, he stood transfixed at the sight of feminine perfection before him. A fully endowed woman of youthful charm whose engaging stare and smile shook his confidence and melted any resistance.

He was used to classic Greek and Roman beauty. He had placed busts several busts around his piazza in Florence and spent hours studying them. He often wondered how much license a sculptor had taken in reshaping imperfections to improve upon what nature had provided. There would be no need for improvement in what his eyes feasted on now. The beauty of the woman before him commanded the room by her very presence as he eased forward and stood before her.

“Cosimo,” Alessandro Bucardo, a loose jawed man with a protruding belly said. “Please forgive this intrusion. I took license that you might agree to see me in this unprecedented situation”.

“And I see you brought someone along,” Cosimo whispered, turning to face a raven haired, bronze skinned beauty whose eyes lit the room.

“Indeed, I have.” Bucardo swept his hand toward her and said. “She finds herself in an untenable situation. One of the utmost urgency. Allow me to introduce Desiree. She has sought me out for assistance in a certain matter. I thought, with your connections, your influence, that you might... Well, I thought you would be best able to advise her.”

“Shall we see what her needs are, then?” Cosimo said. “Please. Sit. Both of you.” He nodded toward a double settee on which Bucardo and the woman sat as Cosimo slid a cushioned stool up and sat to face them.

“I think she...” Bucardo began.

Cosimo drew a finger to his lips. “Let her speak on her own behalf. Desiree? What is your full name?”

“That is it, sir. All I have. Desiree is not even my given name. It is what they called me.”

“Not given?” Cosimo asked.

“Desiree has escaped dire circumstance,” Bucardo said. “She came to me for aid. She had nowhere else to go. No one to turn to. I happen to know her from... Well, she is an acquittance. I know her employer, if that’s what you can call him. He has not treated her well. He does not treat any of them well.”

“So, you ran away?” Cosimo looked at the woman and asked.

“Escaped from her owner,” Bucardo answered

“She is owned, then?”

“Bought and paid for. Enslaved. She is Moroccan. Purchased in Morocco and carried over.”

“Carried over for...”

“The usual purpose. To service men. To pay for her cost and then begin to earn a profit. Tis frowned upon but not illegal.”

“I am so ashamed.” Desiree leaned over and buried her head in her hands. “I just escaped,” she said as she looked up. “I have no plan. Nowhere to go. I knew this man...” She glanced at Bucardo. “He’s been kind to me and I...”

“Then you need help getting back home,” Cosimo asked. “Back to Morocco?”

She looked up and shook her head. “They would not have me back. They are the ones who sold me. I had been with a man they disfavored. A thief, really. That’s what they called him. That’s why they... If I returned, they would stone and kill me. But the men would make use of me first, knowing what I have done and what has happened to me. It was not my

idea to come here. To bother you like this.” She looked up at Cosimo.
“I...”

“Do you have a place to stay?” Cosimo asked. “A place to sleep this night?”

Bucardo raised both hands. ‘My wife... I couldn’t... She wouldn’t...’

“Then you shall stay here,” Cosimo said. “There is plenty of room. Far more than I require.”

CHAPTER 18

“We eat well here, you and I,” Desiree said, sitting with Puglisi at a long table in the kitchen of the Riccardi Palace, one of many Medici palaces and estates in and out of Florence that, at least in Puglisi's opinion, Cosimo seemed to be fond of collecting.

“Here and there,” Puglisi said. “Here, where you are staying, is secondary in Florence. Smaller. He visits here. He mainly stays in his Boboli Palazzo on the hill across the river.”

“With his wife and children?” you said.

“Child. Just one. A boy. It's convenient.”

“And you?”

“I follow like a shadow always with him.”

“And live a life in shadow.”

“A shadow out of the light. Yet, I eat what he eats. That is my job. Tis what I'm good at. Tis my calling.”

“I am ashamed to say, the same for me,” Desiree said.

“I don't take your meaning.”

“I am good at what I do. At what I've been forced into. And yet, unlike you, I am not proud of it.”

“I spend my life in search of poisons and their antidotes. Not much to be proud of.”

“Both of us have our uses, then,” Desiree said. “Yet, for me, I cannot ply my wares on my own. I would be arrested and then taken advantage of in confinement. You have found your calling in working for a prince.”

“Tis true, Puglisi agreed, a mixed plate of cheeses, olives, and freshly baked bread sitting before them. “And you would stand fit as a princess.

You have the look of one. The stature of what one would like to be. Perhaps that's what my master saw in you. More what he desired than what he had."

"I've been called many things," Desiree said, nibbling cheese. "A goddess even. When men are naked and drunk and prancing about like fools, they are apt to say most anything that keeps them excited. Anything they believe might keep *me* excited."

"And does it?" Puglisi broke off a corner of bread and asked.

"What I do, I do half asleep. Mostly to get it over. I paste on a working smile they take as real when they don't look me in the eye. Even those who do, don't see behind that mask. I mostly feel disgust for myself and pity for them. But mostly indifference to the lust nature employs to reproduce itself. The two sides of human nature. Lust and power are often seen together."

"You think deeply." "Puglisi said as he laid his bread down. "You seem to know a lot for a..."

"For a woman? For someone who now gives pleasure to your master for her keep?"

"That was not my intent."

"Whatever I am, whatever I have, will soon be outlived as my beauty fades. Yet what I do engages me in moments and leaves gaps of time between to linger and do as I will. I have learned to read to distract myself and fill the void. I have sometimes given service in trade for a book or a lesson. Customers are most willing to comply. It pleases them to bring me gifts and teach me. It enhances their pleasure."

"So, you live a life that... I don't know what to say it... A life that..."

"A life that is lived, like any other. Neither of us has chosen who we are or the talents we were given. We have simply found a way to employ them. Look to yours. It provides the food at this table, fine wine and

cheeses unavailable to most. You are the fortunate one. Unlike me, your talent will not wear thin as your body ages.”

“What you call my ‘talent’ puts my life at risk every time I swallow. Every time I eat or drink. You, at least...”

“No. You are wrong it that,” Desiree said. “I have come close to death many times. Men can be violent when excited. Most are strangers, and many stronger than me. A few edge up close to pain and death before they finish. My life sometimes hangs on a fist holding back before its power is released.”

“Certainly, not Cosimo.”

“Of course not. Not thus far, but neither is he gentle. He plays rough. And I encourage that. He enjoys it.”

“You speak frankly.”

“We are both owned, are we not? Both slaves, in a way. Prostitutes of sorts, paid for our services?”

“Which is also true of Cosimo, is that not? Others pay him to perform a banking service, do they not? To move their money around? To hold it secure? To earn a profit?”

Desiree shrugged. “There is better compensation in the banking trade. More rewards, more luxury, more palaces. He keeps me in one. Is that not a prison for my services? There must be others. Other women. You follow him everywhere. You must know his full range of appetites.”

“There have been others, though one at a time. His father advised him of that.”

“*Two* others now, if you count his wife. They must make love on occasion. They must. He has a child.”

“And tries for another.”

“He tells you that?”

“Once, when he winked at me at breakfast. Many children die. The black plague is not so long gone. One is not enough.”

“And his wife complies?”

“I suspect, like us, she does her duty. She earns her keep.”

“Does she know about me? About the others he has had?”

“I do not believe she cares.”

“How would you know that?”

“Her maids tell me. We are a league of servants. We pass what we know among ourselves. Who else *can* we trust? You will be included among us once they get to know you better.”

“I feel as though I already am trusted. You tell me much.”

“Foolishly, perhaps,” Puglisi said. “You are a beautiful woman.”

CHAPTER 19

Five years later

May 1442

“Ahh, the follies of youth,” Niccolò Niccoli said to Cosimo as they strolled in the massive Boboli Gardens behind the Pitti Palace. “What did we call ourselves in those days? You and me and Bracciolini? The three thieves?”

“We can’t leave out the monk who showed us the way,” Cosimo said. “If it hadn’t been for him...”

“How much did we pay him,” Niccoli asked as they circled Cosimo’s newly installed fountain that had yet to spout water.

“A pittance, considering what we got. A perfect copy of Plato’s Republic when few others were to be had.”

“Ah, yes,” Niccoli nodded. “Our map for creating a new classic beauty in Florence. The dreams we had. And have we accomplished, Cosimo? What do you think?”

“Look around, my friend,” Cosimo swept his hand toward his just completed terraced hill with its double sided promenade. “All these fountains, the walkways, and gardens are all part of that.”

“But these are all yours,” Niccoli corrected him. “Not for public view.”

“Granted,” Cosimo conceded, facing his longtime friend. “Yet, have we not added much classic art and sculpture to Florence’s piazzas and open spaces?”

“And so we have. Yet, there is much more to be done. How can there ever be enough art and beauty to grace our city? Florence itself has become

the world center for art, as it should be. I hope our legacy, you're legacy, will continue to grow in grace and refinement once you are gone. Your son, Piero. What of him? Can he be counted on to fulfill the promise we began? Does he take a healthy interest in our hopes and dreams?"

"Health is not a word I would use with Piero. He has been a sickly lad from the start, spending as much time in bed as on his feet. At twenty now, he does his business in his bed as if that were his office. I don't know what to make of him. I never have."

"At least you *have* a son. *Someone* to carry on."

"I don't put much stock in this one. But he has done his duty in one sense. He has conceived a son himself. A bright lad, even at a young age. One who follows me around incessantly. Who *does* take an interest in the arts and artists. If he picks up where we leave off, he may paint the city even grander. More magnificent. Can you imagine? Medici the Magnificent. How does that sound?"

"It does have a ring to it. But this place?" Niccoli glanced over his shoulder toward the Pitti Palace and asked. "It seems that thievery is still part of your nature. I hear you have stolen it from its owner."

"Acquired it at a bargain price, perhaps. Luca Pitti found himself in dire straits. His bank was on the verge of collapse. He could not hold what he had without an infusion of ready cash to shore him up. When he asked my help, I made him an offer."

Niccoli scoffed. "Of course, you did. Just what you needed, am I right? Another palace. How many do you have?"

"This one's not for me. It's for the countess. She has borne me a son and has put up with me all these years. I have spent much time away on business."

"Business and *other* matters?" Niccoli grinned.

“I admit, business mixed with pleasure. The countess and I have always had an understanding. She runs the household. I take care of banking. We lead our separate lives and keep them separate.”

“Yet you seem to be in charge of the art and enhancement of these palaces and gardens.”

“In which she takes little interest, save the pleasure of enjoying them. These gardens,” Cosimo said, lifting his chin uphill. “And the Pitti Palace up there. I have bought them both as a gift for her. I have to spend the money. The flow won’t stop. I cannot spend it fast enough.”

“And as to that bridge you built atop another?” Niccoli asked, glancing back toward the Arno.

“The Ponte Vecchio? Simply an upper walkway across the river in private. I shall decorate that bridge as well... Now, shall we go inside to see how the reconstruction is coming and toast ourselves as youthful thieves and harbingers of the future, however much of ours remains?”

CHAPTER 20

Puglisi, Cosimo's longtime food and wine taster, passed down the long hall in the Petti Palace on his way to the stairs that led down his room beneath. But then he stopped short, turned around, and walked back. He thought he saw a silhouette in the moonlit just outside on the veranda. When he opened the door and stepped out, Desiree stood leaning on the wall and shaking.

"Who's there?" she stiffened and turned. *"Who is it?"*

"It's just me," Puglisi said as he stepped closer.

Desiree drew a long breath and sighed. "You frightened me."

"What are you doing here? It's late. Close to midnight... And you've been crying." He bent forward and looked. "What happened? Have you hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing," she said, her voice hoarse. "Nothing of any consequence."

"Nothing of consequence. But still something."

"No... It's just... I..." She straightened and winced.

"You're hurting."

"It's nothing. I'm used to it.

"Use to what?"

"It will go away. It's part of what I do. Part of the trade."

"What trade?"

"Me. My trade."

"But you are no longer in that trade. You have no need of it. Cosimo would not permit anyone... He would never... Cosimo? Has he hurt you?"

"Not the worst I've had," she said, wincing again and rotating her shoulder. "Yet, not the least, either."

"What has he done? Tell me."

“Nothing that won’t heal. Men are like that.”

“*All* men are not. I am not. I would not have...”

“You are one of the few. A very loving man. I know. I know you.”

Puglisi blushed, hoping she couldn’t see the color of his cheeks in the moonlight. “I know not of love. I have never had the opportunity.”

“Never? None? *No once*? That is hard to believe. Any woman would be lucky to be with you. *I* would be lucky. I have had little experience with caring men. They save that side of them for other women. For those who would not accept the side I see. With me, they pay me, and they get what they come for. They do as they please and then go home to their wives. Whatever they feel, whatever they want, they get to show it in full display. They get to act upon the evil within them.”

As an awkward silence settled between them, Puglisi felt ashamed for himself and for all men.

“Hug me,” Desiree finally stepped forward and said. “I could use one. Slowly. Gently.”

Puglisi reached out tentatively and wrapped his arms around her as she leaned into him. “*Ahhh!*” she screamed and drew back. “It hurts back there. Where he beat me.”

“He did what? He beat you? How could he? Cosimo? I would not believe he had that in him.”

“I did not myself... Here... I’ll show you.” She turned, slowly slipped her frock above the head, eased it off, and turned around to reveal lines scarred in strips across her back. “How does it look? I am unable to see.”

“I’m not certain. There’s not much light.”

“Look closer, then. Tell me.”

Not bad,” he lied as he stared wide-eyed at the pattern of raw red flesh running down her back.

“I don’t believe you,” she said, turning around to reveal her breasts in the moonlight. “Each sting was harder to bear. It must look awful. That’s why I came out here. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t lay in bed.”

“Any man who would do this... *Any* man.”

“Do not blame Cosimo. I teased him. It got out of hand.”

“You *asked* him?”

“Not so much asked. I told him to do whatever he wished. He had a whip. I don’t know where it came from. He must have had it hidden.”

“But we are not animals. Not his horses in his stable. He doesn’t own us.”

“He does me. I am his slave. Perhaps not paid for, but given as a gift.”

“Anyone who would do such a thing, I could take him in my hands and strangle him to show him how *that* feels.”

“That would be of little use. We need him. We depend on him. We have nowhere else to go.”

Puglisi dropped his shoulders.

“But there is something you *can* do,” Desiree whispered.

“What?” He looked up. “What is it? Anything.”

“I can’t reach back there. I have a salve. Can you come back to help me with it? *Would* you?”

“I don’t... I think...”

“I beg you. I cannot do it alone. Come with me to the Palazzo Medici Riccardi. Tis not far. You can be back by dawn. Please. I beg you.”

Without waiting for his answer, she took his hand and led him back, with no one in the streets that night to observe them. She sat on the edge of her Riccardi bed and eased her garment off. Naked above her waist, she handed him a small vase of salve and turned her back to him. “Gently,” she said. “Very gently.”

He dabbed two fingers in the salve and rubbed each line as tenderly as he could. She neither winced nor wheezed. After a while, she purred cat like.

“Thank you,” she said when he finished and turned back to face him. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“I want to. You comforted me. You eased my pain. I would like to comfort you. I have wanted to for some time. You must have known that. You must have seen it when our eyes met. Have you not wanted that yourself?... Here. Let me show you. Hand me the salve. I am good at this.”

CHAPTER 21

Back in his bed at Palazzo Pitti, Puglisi awoke in heaven, at least as close as he would ever get in this life. A fallen goddess – fallen not of her own will – had made love to him. He lay with her gently as long he dared, lingering with his eyes closed, afraid to wake lest he lose what he could not understand. Afraid the love he had always wanted, that he had always dreamed of, had been a dream. What else could it be? He didn't deserve love. His own mother hadn't wanted him. Why would any woman? Especially a young, beautiful woman?

Then an odd fear struck him like a devil's dagger plunged deep in his heart. Just as Eve had tempted Adam with a single bite of an apple that banished him from paradise, had the devil used Desiree as his temptress to lure Puglisi down a fallen path? Would he now be excluded from the Medici's gardens, as close to Paradise as he would ever come on earth?

Wide awake now and fully in his senses – he realized he had been drunk on ecstasy last night although he hadn't sipped a drop. What was he to do now that his guard was up and everything had changed? How could he face his master, the man who employed him and who had such evil in him?

A shiver ran up his spine as he recalled what Desiree had whispered to him. "We much keep this between us," she said, kissing him on his cheek before she let him go. "It will not happen again. I needed comforting. We both did. This will be our special time in remembrance only. It will be our secret. Just the two of us."

If only it were that simple, Puglisi thought as he climbed out of bed and stumbled to his washbasin to splash his face. A taste of heaven would not be so easily tucked away as if it had never happened, and that would not be the only secret he would be obliged to keep. Beyond a taste of heaven,

he had the scars of hell in the bloodlines that ran down Desiree's soft back. And her wounds had been inflicted more than once. Deeper scars told a tale beyond her words. How could Puglisi stand to be in the same room, knowing the pain Cosimo had inflicted on one so beautiful? On a slave, someone beneath him. On a servant, like himself. How much license does that much power and money allow, Puglisi thought as he dressed and prepared for the day, a day like yesterday, yet like none other he had ever lived?

CHAPTER 22

The next few weeks were torturous for Puglisi. He lumbered through his motions. He did his duty. But nothing felt the same. He could not look Desiree in the eye. He glanced away as they passed. What angered him the most, Cosimo didn't seem to notice any difference. It was as if, for him, everything was normal. Nothing had changed. And then, late one afternoon, as Puglisi rested in his quarters, Desiree burst into his room in a panic. "I am lost," she cried, her entire body shaking. "You must help me. Please. I beg you."

"Step in quickly," he said as he rose from his bed. "Sit down." He went to the door and poked his head out. With no one there, he snapped the door shut and turned to Desiree, who sat on his bed with her face buried in her hands.

"What happened?" he sat next to her and asked. "What is it?"

"He is at it again," she lifted her watery eyes and stared at him. "It has gotten worse. *Much* worse. It took more to satisfy him. I could not take it any longer. I refused."

"My God," Puglisi shook his head and said. "I've been watching him. I've seen nothing different. Nothing unusual."

"He is that way with me until his other side comes out. I have tried to comply. I have gone as far as I am able. What could I do? The last time, he would not stop."

"Bastard," Puglisi muttered. "I could kill him."

Desiree turned her eyes to him and brushed a tear away. "Could you?"

"Could I what?"

"Kill him? Could you kill him?"

"I would never... Of course, I could."

"How would you? If you did, I mean?"

“How?... I am his food and wine taster. I am the one who keeps others from killing him.”

“Of course... Of course, you are.” She lowered her chin. “There’s more,” she said. “He has turned me out. He has let me go to punish me. He wishes me to leave at once. To never see him again.”

Puglisi reached out and took her hand. “I am glad you came to me. I will find a way to get you through this. To get *us* through. I know the palaces. I know where you can hide. Where you can wait for me until I determine what to do. It won’t take long.”

CHAPTER 23

Luck sometimes runs out, even for a rat named Fortunato, Puglisi thought as he stood at his worktable. This particular rodent, of course, was not his first control rat. A rat only lives a year or two. All his Luckies had been selected to lead a healthy life against which to measure those tested for poisons and antidotes. With time and age a factor, the current Fortunato's time and luck had run out. He had done nothing to deserve his imminent demise. Cosimo's cruelty had destined his fate. This would be his final wine testing before a final mixture was offered to Cosimo.

But maybe this Fortunato's life *could* be different, he thought as he turned his attention to the double glazed bowl to keep poisons from absorbing and contaminating a subsequent mix. He had never poisoned a man before. Now, he was determined to kill the man he was pledged to protect. A man who had painfully whipped and scared the only woman who had ever shown Puglisi any affection. The only woman who had ever made love to him, who had opened the door to ecstasy he had never known existed.

He had formulated his plan. He knew where Cosimo hid his ready cash. The monies he held aside to slip under the table for private deals he wished to keep from staining his account books. It would not be a substantial amount by Cosimo's reckoning, but a small fortune compared to anything Puglisi could ever hope to get his hands on. If he absconded with it, he could live comfortably a year on that amount under modest circumstances. *Two* could live on that amount in Milan, Florence's traditional rival. Milan might not welcome him and Desiree with open arms, but they might simply ignore their presence and let them blend in quietly.

Carrying out his plan would not require a painful death. Fortunato had done nothing to deserve a painful demise, and Cosimo, despite his cruelty

to Desiree, had employed Puglisi all these years and had never treated him poorly. He had treated him as a servant, as someone beneath him, as someone to simply perform his duties and keep out of the way.

Puglisi turned away from his table and stepped to the first in a row of wooden rat cases. He lifted the latch peg and opened the gate, then reached inside and lifted Fortunato out for his exercise run, just as he always did before a testing. This would be the final stretch of Fortunato's tiny legs, Puglisi thought as he gently brushed his index finger along Fortunato's furry head.

All the Fortunatos were thirsty after a run, having not been allowed water overnight. After exercise, they quickly drank whatever liquid Puglisi provided in their water dish, placing their fate in his hand as he turned the current Fortunato around and looked him in the eye. An unexpected tinge of guilt, even pity, struck him, and quickly banished as he reached in, cupped a hand beneath the rodent, and carried him over to his exercise maze, placed him at one end with a nibble of cheese at the other end of his familiar run. Fortunato dashed round, not making a single mistake or missing a turn, then nibbling the cheese and cocking his head to look up at the man who held his fate in his hands. Puglisi cupped his hand to lift him from beneath, carried him back to his cage, sat him inside, and pegged the gate shut.

He returned to his worktable, stood on his toes, and lifted three small bottles off a high shelf. He uncorked each and mixed a potion he knew well. Not to test for an antidote this time. This time to combine ingredients for which there was no antidote and which he preferred for Cosimo. It matched his mixed feelings for a man he had loved and now hated. If all went as planned, the result would be a sedative at first, followed by a relatively painless fading away until life ebbed away.

He reached for the wine jug he had carried up from the wine cellars, the vintage that Cosimo favored. He poured a small amount into Fortunato's drinking dish and added his poison mix. He crossed over and unpegged Fortunato's cage, gently sat the dish inside, and watched him lap it up. It would not take long. Fortunato would soon get sleepy then lay his head down and leave this life behind.

CHAPTER 24

Cosimo's wine taster always ate an hour before serving his master. If the food or wine was contaminated, it could take a while to absorb and take effect. Longer for large meals, depending on how much and how slowly Cosimo ate. But even that was just a guess since Puglisi had never poisoned a man. He could only extrapolate from rats. With Cosimo, he had to prepare the right amount the first time. He could not afford to *nearly* kill his master.

As was normal for a meal, the cook prepared enough for two. Stuffed partridge to start this time with an oxen broth soup, and, as normal, Puglisi scooped half of each in a bowl or on a plate to eat himself. He had already chosen a wine to complement this day's offering and filled two goblets, one for Cosimo and another for himself. To keep the kitchen help unawares, he would pass by his testing room and add poison to Cosimo's goblet just before he carried it to him.

He finished the meal, then drank a second round of wine to steady himself and bolster his courage. Then he impatiently waited. If he was still alive, as he always was, and feeling well after an hour, he would have the cook rewarm Cosimo's meal to ready it for him.

CHAPTER 25

Cosimo sat alone at the end of a long table in his dining room, prepared to eat alone, as he often did at noon. For a later dinner, waiters brought up food that Puglisi had tested. But for lunch, unless he expected company, he preferred to have Puglisi carry it to him.

“Ah, my old friend,” Cosimo looked up and said as soon as Puglisi entered, the word “friend” taking on a new meaning for Puglisi, a mask for Cosimo to hide behind. “Bring it over and sit with me today,” Cosimo added, a request he had rarely before.

Puglisi steadied his hands to keep the tray from shaking as he carried it across, placed it in front of Cosimo, and sat on a side chair.

“I need your advice,” Cosimo said, lifting a fork and poking the partridge, then changing his mind, laying the fork down, and lifting the goblet. “There is something I need to ask you,” he said. He thought a second, tightened his lips, and sat the goblet down. “It has to do with Desiree. She has left me. Has she said anything to you? Anything at all? Did you know of this?”

“I was... It never occurred to me that...”

“My men caught her on the run, headed south. She tried to abscond with the household monies I used in business. All of it.”

Puglisi stiffened.

“Has she acted oddly? Have you noticed anything unusual?”

“I... I don't... I didn't...”

“It's a sad situation.”

“Sad?” Puglisi was able to ask.

“Florence holds no secrets. They leak like water through a fist. My spies inform me that she has taken up her old ways. That has given herself

over to other men when I am gone. One of them, maybe more, has beaten her badly with a whip. I have seen the scars.”

“But *why?*” Puglisi clenched his knees under the table and asked. “Why would she *be* with others? She had everything right here. *All* of it.”

“They say I am obsessed with beauty and art. I believe she is obsessed with conquest and pain. Perhaps she thinks she deserves the latter. She asked me to beat her more than once. She even brought a whip with her. I refused, of course. I suppose that’s when...” Cosimo shook his head as he lifted his goblet and raised to his lips.

“*No!*” Puglisi bolted up. “*Wait!*”

“*What?*” Cosimo gripped the goblet.

“*That wine. There is something wrong with it.*”

Cosimo held the goblet out and stared at it. “How could that be?”

“Maybe Desiree. She is a clever one. Perhaps she found a way to pass it by my tasting. Something is wrong. I know it. I can feel it.” He grabbed the goblet as Cosimo opened his hand and let him have it. “I’ll fetch you another, just to make sure.”

“No need for that,” Cosimo said as he leaned back and relaxed. “You have already saved my life once from tainted wine in the tower. I *owe* you my life. And Carlo,” Cosimo said, calling his wine taster by his given name for the first time. “I have been meaning to thank you for your service all these years. I have come to trust you. Who else *can* I trust? What would I do without you?”

Puglisi stood abruptly and left, unable to speak or look back. He carried the tainted goblet down to his room and propped himself up in bed. He held it out in front of him, hesitated, then gulped the contents in three long swallows. He leaned back, tired already as he slowly drifted off, dreaming of what might have been.

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In the Siberian winter of 1921, two tons of Tsarist gold secretly travel by rail to Alexander Kolchak, Supreme Commander of the White Army in Siberia fighting the Bolshevik Communist Reds. The gold never arrived. For the next hundred years that vast treasure was thought to have been sledded out onto frozen Lake Baikal sink in the spring melt. When Marta Russco, a Russian reporter and friend of Clayton Lovell Stone's, is brutally murdered in Siberia, Stone weaves through a tightening web of political corruption, contract murder, and Putin's secret love life in search of the martyred Tsar's lost gold. But while Stone follows the trail of lost gold, others after that gold seek to find that gold and silence Stone beneath the frozen depths of Lake



The Queen and the Playwright *Love's Labor Lost*

The Queen and the Playwright is the gripping tale, told in narrative fiction, of a brilliant political figure, fourteenth in line for the throne of England, whose clandestine affair and child by the "virgin queen," Elizabeth I, threw the succession into jeopardy and opened England to the imminent threat of invasion. The father of that secret child and author of the "Shakespeare" plays was forced to shed his name, reputation, and any connection with the crown, replaced by William Shakespeare, an illiterate in need of money.

This is the true story of how William Shakespeare went down in history as the most famous playwright the world has ever known, while the actual author, away from court and out of power, died in excruciating pain, reworking plays he knew could never be published under his own name.



Body of Evidence

What if William Shakespeare didn't write the plays attributed to him? And, if he didn't write them, why was the true author's name deleted from the greatest plays ever written in the English language? "He didn't write them you know," a Smithsonian researcher I was dating looked across the restaurant table and flatly stated. "What do you mean, he didn't write them? Of course he wrote them." "Believe what you want to believe," she said, adjusting her napkin in her lap. "If you want to stay naïve, that's entirely up to you." True or false, fact or rumor, the case against Shakespeare as the playwright had apparently convinced one bright Smithsonian researcher that the true authorship lay in another direction. I had always wanted to write a historical novel. Skeptical or not, maybe this was the time and this was the subject. *Body of Evidence* is the story that led me to England on the adventure of a lifetime.



About the Author



After years as a practicing clinical psychologist, I have recently turned my attention to a fantasy life of writing novels. Clayton Lovell Stone, my action-hero alter-ego, stands over my shoulder and dictates as I scribe his adventures. When someone asked me what I do to keep busy, I said I write thriller novels. I spend a lot of time figuring out different ways to kill people. “Isn’t that nice, she said.”

In my real work life, I am a clinical psychologist who practiced in Delaware, Maryland, and New Mexico. For many years, I was the Chief Psychologist at the Upper Shore Mental Health Center in Chestertown, Maryland, and had a private practice in Easton. I taught therapy and psychopathology courses in Washington College’s Graduate Psychology Program. I was employed as a consultant for adult and adolescent rehabilitation programs, geriatric centers, and law enforcement. I testified as an expert witness in psychological profiling for both the prosecution and the defense and was a member of the State of Maryland’s Forensic Evaluation Team. I supervised psychologists for the Maryland Prison System and served in the Mental Health Section to the 24th Infantry Division of the United States Army in Munich, Germany. I graduated from Stanford University in California and earned a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Maryland. I currently live on Long Island, New York.

