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The Reincarnationist

M.J. Rose

Published by MIRA Books

Extract

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Dear Reader,

As a fellow book lover always searching for her next unforgettable read, I'm delighted to share with you a new novel that has captured my imagination in every way. *The Reincarnationist* by M.J. Rose is like nothing I've ever read before. Part modern-day thriller, part historical fiction, *The Reincarnationist* touches every sense. We meet Josh Ryder, a man who survives a modern-day bombing, only to become haunted by past life experiences. It's a tale about the fall of pagan Rome and a forbidden love that travels through time. It's a story of secrets, murder, greed and, ultimately, the quest to solve the mysteries of reincarnation.

Beautifully written and painstakingly researched, Rose believably portrays what happens when the past rises to meet the present and makes us question who we are and who we were.

We are incredibly proud to be publishing *The Reincarnationist* in MIRA® in January 2008. I hope you enjoy this extraordinary book.

Sincerely,

Alison Byrne

Publishing Director
MIRA Books

Chapter 1

They will come back, come back again,
As long as the red earth rolls.
He never wasted a leaf or a tree.
Do you think he would squander souls?

—Rudyard Kipling

Rome, Italy—sixteen months ago

Josh Ryder looked through the camera's viewfinder, focusing on the security guard arguing with a young mother whose hair was dyed so red it looked like she was on fire. The search of the woman's baby carriage was quickly becoming anything but routine, and Josh moved in closer for his next shot.

He'd just been keeping himself busy while awaiting the arrival of a delegation of peacekeepers from several superpowers who would be meeting with the pope that morning, but like

several other members of the press and tourists who'd been ignoring the altercation or losing patience with it, he was becoming concerned. Although searches went on every hour, every day, around the world, the potential for danger hung over everyone's lives, lingering like the smell of fire.

In the distance the sonorous sound of a bell ringing called the religious to prayer, its echo out of sync with the woman's shrill voice as she continued to protest. Then, with a huge shove, she pushed the carriage against the guard's legs, and just as Josh brought the image into that clarity he called "perfect vision," the kind of image that the newspaper would want, the kind of conflict they loved captured on film, he heard the blast.

Then a flash of bluish white light.

The next moment, the world exploded.

In the protective shadows of the altar, Julius and his brother whispered, reviewing their plans for the last part of the rescue and recovery. Each of them kept a hand on his dagger, prepared in case one of the emperor's soldiers sprang out of the darkness. In Rome, in the Year of their Lord 391, temples were no longer sanctuaries for pagan priests. Converting to Christianity was not a choice, but an official mandate. Resisting was a crime punishable by death. Blood spilled in the name of the Church was not a sin, it was the price of victory.

The two brothers strategized—Drago would stay in the temple for an hour longer and then rendezvous with Julius at the tomb by the city gates. As a diversion, that morning's elaborate funeral had been a success, but they were still worried. Everything depended on this last part of their strategy going smoothly.

Julius drew his cape closed, touched his brother's shoulder, bidding him goodbye and good luck, and skulked out of the basilica, keeping to the building's edge in case anyone was watching. He heard approaching horses and the clatter of wheels. Flattening himself against the stone wall, Julius held his breath and didn't move. The chariot passed without stopping.

He'd finally reached the edge of the porch when, behind him, like a sudden avalanche of rocks, he heard an angry shout split open the silence: "Show me where the treasury is!"

This was the disaster Julius and his brother had feared and discussed, but Drago had been clear—even if the temple was attacked, Julius was to continue on. Not turn back. Not try to help him. The treasure Julius needed to save was more important than any one life or any five lives or any fifty lives.

But then a razor-sharp cry of pain rang out, and ignoring the plan, he ran back through the shadows, into the temple and up to the altar.

His brother was not where he'd left him.

"Drago?"

No answer.

"Drago?"

Where was he?

Julius worked his way down one of the dark side aisles of the temple and up the next. When he found Drago, it wasn't by sound or by sight—but by tripping over his brother's supine body.

He pulled him closer to the flickering torches. Drago's skin was already deathly pale, and his torn robe revealed a six-inch horizontal slash on his stomach crossing a vertical gash that cut him all the way down to his groin.

Julius gagged. He'd seen eviscerated carcasses of both man

and beast before and had barely given them a passing glance. Sacrifices, felled soldiers or punished criminals were one thing. But this was Drago. This blood was his blood.

"You weren't…supposed to come back," Drago said, dragging every syllable out as if it was stuck in his throat. "I sent him…to look in the loculi…for the treasures. I thought… Stabbed me, anyway. But there's time…for us to get out… now…now!" Drago struggled to raise himself up to a sitting position, spilling his insides as he moved.

Julius pushed him down.

"Now…we need…to go now." Drago's voice was weakening.

Trying to staunch the blood flow, Julius put pressure on the laceration, willing the intestines and nerves and veins and skin to rejoin and fuse back together, but all he accomplished was staining his hands in the hot, sticky mess.

"Where are the virgins?" The voice erupted like Vesuvius without warning and echoed through the interior nave. Raucous laughter followed.

How many soldiers were there?

"Let's find the booty we came here for," another voice chimed in.

"Not yet, first I want one of the virgins. Where are the virgin whores?"

"The treasury first, you lecherous bastard."

More laughter.

So it wasn't one man; a regiment had stormed the temple. Shouting, demanding, blood-lust coating their words. Let them pillage this place, let them waste their energy, they'd come too late: there were no pagans to convert, no treasure left to find

and no women left to rape, they'd all already been killed or sent into hiding.

"We have to go…" Drago whispered as once again he fought to rise.

He'd stayed behind to make sure everyone else got out safely. Why him, why Drago?

"You can't move, you've been hurt—" Julius broke off, not knowing how to tell his brother that half of his internal organs were no longer inside his body.

"Then leave me. You need to get to her… Save her and the treasures…. No one…no one but you…"

It wasn't about the sacred objects anymore. It was about two people who both needed him desperately: the woman he loved and his brother, and the fates were demanding Julius sacrifice one of them for the other.

I can't let her die and I can't leave you to die.

No matter which one he chose, how would he live with the decision?

"Look what I found," one of the soldiers shouted.

Screams of vengeance reverberated through the majestic hall. A shriek rang out above all the other noise. A woman's cry.

Julius crawled out, hid behind a column and peered into the nave. He couldn't see the woman's upper body, but her pale legs were thrashing under the brute as the soldier pumped away so roughly that blood pooled under her. Who was the poor woman? Had she wandered in thinking she'd find a safe haven in the old temple, only to find she'd descended into hell? Could Julius help her? Take the men by surprise? No, there were too many of them. At least eight he could see. By now the rape had attracted more attention, drawing other men who

forgot about their search to crowd around and cheer on their compatriot.

And what would happen to Drago if he left his side?

Then the question didn't matter because beneath his hands, Julius felt his brother's heart stop.

He felt his heart stop.

Julius beat Drago's chest, pumping and trying, trying but failing to stimulate the beating. Bending down, he breathed into his brother's mouth, forcing his own air down his throat, waiting for any sign of life.

Finally, his lips still on his brother's lips, his arm around his brother's neck, he wept, knowing he was wasting precious seconds but unable to stop. Now he didn't have to choose between them—he could go to the woman who was waiting for him at the city gates.

He must go to her.

Trying not to attract attention, he abandoned Drago's body, backed up, found the wall and started crawling. There was a break in the columns up ahead; if he could get to it undetected, he might make it out.

And then he heard a soldier shout for him to halt.

If he couldn't save her, Julius would at least die trying, so, ignoring the order, he kept moving.

Outside, the air was thick with the black smoke that burned his lungs and stung his eyes. What were they incinerating now? No time to find out. Barely able to see what lay ahead of him, he kept running down the eerily quiet street. After the cacophony of the scene he'd just left, it was alarming to be able to hear his own footsteps. If someone was on the lookout the sound would give him away, but he needed to risk it.

Picturing her in the crypt, crouched in the weak light, counting the minutes, he worried that she would be anxious that he was late and torment herself that something had gone dangerously wrong. Her bravery had always been as steadfast as the stars; it was difficult even now to imagine her afraid. But this was a far different situation than anything she'd ever faced, and it was all his fault, all his shame. They'd risked too much for each other. He should have been stronger, should have resisted.

And now, because of him, everything they treasured, especially their lives, was at stake.

Tripping over the uneven, cracked surfaces, he stumbled. The muscles in his thighs and calves screamed, and every breath irritated his lungs so harshly he wanted to cry out. Tasting dirt and grit mixed with his salty sweat as it dripped down his face and wet his lips, he would have given anything for water—cold, sweet water from the spring, not this alkaline piss. His feet pounded the stones and more pain shot up through his legs, but still he ran.

Suddenly, raucous shouting and thundering footfalls filled the air. The ground reverberated, and from the intensity he knew the marauders were coming closer. He looked right, left. If he could find a sheltered alcove, he could flatten himself against the wall and pray they'd run past and miss him. As if that would help. He knew all about praying. He'd relied on it, believed in it. But the prayers he'd offered up might as well have been spit in the gutter for the good they'd done.

"The sodomite is getting away!"

"Scum of the earth."

"Scared little pig."

"Did you defecate yourself yet, little pig?"

They laughed, trying to outdo each other with slurs and accusations. Their chortles echoed in the hollow night, lingered on the hot wind, and then, mixed in with their jeers, another voice broke through.

"Josh?"

No, don't listen. Keep going. Everything depends on getting to her in time.

A heavy fog was rolling in. He stumbled, then righted himself. He took the corner.

On both sides of him were identical colonnades with dozens of doors and recessed archways. He knew this place! He could hide here in plain sight and they would run by and—

"Josh?"

The voice sounded as if it was coming to him from a great blue-green distance, but he refused to stop for it.

She was waiting for him…to save her…to save their secrets…and treasures….

"Josh?"

The voice was pulling him up, up through the murky, briny heaviness.

"Josh?"

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and took in the room, the equipment and his own battered body. Beyond the heart rate, blood oxygen and blood pressure monitor flashing its LED numbers, the IV drip and the EKG machine, he saw a woman's worried face watching him. But it was the wrong face.

This wasn't the woman he'd been running to save.

"Josh? Oh, thank God, Josh. We thought…"

He couldn't be here now. He needed to go back.

The taste of sweat was still on his lips; his lungs still burned. He could hear them coming for him under the steady beat of the machines, but all he could think about was that somewhere she was alone, in the encroaching darkness, and yes, she was afraid, and yes, she was going to suffocate to death if he didn't reach her. He closed his eyes against the onslaught of anguish. If he didn't reach her, he would fail her. And something else, too. The treasures? No. Something more important, something just beyond his consciousness, what was it—

"Josh?"

Grief ripped through him like a knife slitting open his chest, exposing his heart to the raw, harsh reality of having lost her. This wasn't possible. This wasn't real. He'd been remembering the chase and the escape and the rescue as if they had happened to him. But they hadn't. Of course they hadn't.

He wasn't Julius.

He was Josh Ryder. He was alive in the twenty-first century.

This scene belonged sixteen hundred years in the past.

Then why did he feel as if he'd lost everything that had ever mattered to him?

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MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN: 978 0 7783 0197 4

58-0208

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc