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Opening Extract from...

The Botticelli Secret

Written by Marina Fiorato

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The Botticelli Secret

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‘Seven Kings, five are fallen, one is and the other is not yet come;

And when he cometh, he must continue a short space.’

The Book of Revelations, chapter 17 verses 9-10

1

FLORENCE 1482

CHAPTER 1

Florence looks like gold and smells like sulphur.

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

Florence is beautiful and brutal. Her beauty is skin deep; underneath, the blood runs very near the surface. Wondrous palaces and chapels stand right next to the Bargello jail, a place worse than the Inferno. In every church, heaven and hell coexist on the walls. These opposite fates sit cheek by jowl on the ceilings too, divided only by the cross-ribs. In the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, our great cathedral, angels and demons whirl around together in a celestial fortune's wheel. Paradise and damnation are so close, so very close. Even the food is a contradiction. Take my favourite food, carpaccio; slabs of raw meat fair running with blood.

It's delicious, but something had to die to make it.

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

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

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

It was not an auspicious meeting. He did not see me at my best. I was *dressed* in my best, to be sure, for I am always aware of the passing trade. But I happened to be sitting on the balustrade of the river, pissing into the Arno. Framed poetically by the saffron arches of the Ponte Vecchio looming behind. In fairness, it would not have been immediately obvious to the good Brother what I was doing, as my skirts were voluminous. But I had just come from Bembo's bed, was on my way to Signor Botticelli's studio, and the quantity of Muscat I had drunk for breakfast begged for evacuation.

Actually, I'm telling this all wrong—before we go on to talk about Brother Guido, and the right path, let me give

you a glimpse of my old life, and the wrong one. Because unless you know about Bembo, and how I came to model for Signor Botticelli, you will never get to understand the secret, and the secret *is* the story. So let's go back to…the night before? No; no need to take you through all the depraved sex acts we committed for pleasure on Bembo's part and payment on mine. That morning would be time enough: Friday the thirteenth of June, an unlucky day for so many reasons. Spring—the right place to start.

CHAPTER 2

'Chi-chi?'

Madonna. I hated being woken up after a hard night's work. 'Yes?'

'Will you do a favour for me?'

Another one? After the night he'd just had, Bembo should've been doing *me* favours. Over and above our agreed rate of course. But business is business. I smiled sleepily. 'Of course.'

Bembo hauled his considerable weight to his elbow and I caught a whiff of his armpit. *Madonna*. I reached for the lavender pomade from the night table and pressed it to my nose. Smiling coquettishly to dissolve the insult I waited for what came next. It was always hard to tell with Bembo; obscenely rich men reserve the right to be unpredictable.

Benvolio Malatesta.

Fact one: *Primo fatto:* He was called Benvolio Malatesta, but everyone called him Bembo. Maybe because he had a carefully studied jocular air, like your favourite uncle; a quality totally belied by his utter ruthlessness in business. He smiled and joked a lot but;

Fact two: *Secondo fatto:* Bembo was one of the richest men in Florence. He made all his money from importing pearls from the Orient. Lovely things they were; big and fat

and as white as an olive is black. He sent little boys with oyster knives to dive for them. Sometimes these boys ran out of breath or got tangled in seaweed.

Once Bembo brought his finest pearl round for me to wear in my navel when we were fucking (do you see what I mean about never knowing what to expect from him?) Afterwards he wanted it back but I told him I couldn't get it out. That was a lie. I tried later in my bath and it came out, just…but it hurt a lot. I put it back in there. It fit so well, and now I am known for it—I make it one of the things I am famous for. (Like my tits and my hair.) I always wear gowns with cropped bodices or cut-out holes to show off my pearl. Clients always love something unusual. Especially the rich ones.

Bembo didn't seem to mind. His big pearls were used in jewellery, and the little ones ground down for toothpaste for rich gentlemen or facepowder for rich ladies. The pearls made their teeth and skin glow, even when they were spotted as liver and raddled as hags. My navel pearl was all good advertising for Bembo. He said that the pearl would pop out one day when my belly grows big with child. (I didn't tell him there's no chance of that happening. Every middle of the month I stuff waxed cotton squares up my hole to stop men's tallow getting through to my woman's parts. It makes me tighter but no one has complained yet.) For one horrible moment I thought that Bembo was planning to get me pregnant. Was he so cock-dazzled that he wanted marriage? *Madonna*. Is that why he let me keep the pearl? But then I came to my senses. A man like Bembo would hardly want to father a brat on a whore like me, for all my beauty: he has a rich frigid wife at home to cool his bed and bear his sons. And he has never asked for the pearl since, though some clients would have cut a girl's navel to prise it out, not caring if she lived or died. Bembo wouldn't do that

to me though. He likes me. He even paid me three *dinari* for the night when the pearl got stuck, despite the fact that he couldn't get his gem back. Must have been a good fuck.

Fact three: *Tèrzo fatto:* Bembo knows a lot of artists. I think it makes him feel a little bit cultured, like one of his pearls, even though he is actually more like the common little ugly oysters that crowd the seabed. He came from nothing, from a line of fishermen, so he is trying to drag himself up to the surface and the light. Like his oysters he is an ugly creature capable of creating beauty, and he does this by his patronage of painters. It's this third fact that he hit me with. And it bought me a whole heap of trouble.

'Will you pose for a friend of mine?'

I was still half asleep. 'Which friend?' My voice was a crow's croak.

'Alessandro Botticelli. Sandro.'

I vaguely knew the name.

'He thinks you'd be perfect for the central figure for his new panel painting.'

I opened one eye. 'The *central* figure?'

He smiled and his teeth flashed pearl. I swear Bembo wore his wealth in his mouth. 'Yes, Chi-chi. Don't worry. You will be centre stage and all the other figures will pale before your beauty.' Poetry didn't sit well on Bembo's tongue.

'How many figures?'

'Seven others. Eight in total.'

Crowd work. 'Doesn't sound very central to me.'

His smile widened. 'Oh but you will be, Chi-chi. The whole panel is to be called *La Primavera*—spring—and you will be the goddess Flora herself.'

Still I grumbled. 'At least it could have been the Madonna.'

Then he laughed. 'You, the virginal queen of heaven?

The notorious Chi-chi untouched by a man's hand? No and no and no.'

I sulked and turned my head. He tickled my nipples to placate me. 'Listen, pigeon. Sandro wants you *because* you have known the heat of a bed. Flora is to be experienced, fruitful, with a knowing face; even a suggestion that she is with child. But more beautiful than the day.' He knew how to appeal to my vanity.

'And how does *Sandro* know of my charms?'

Bembo collapsed onto his back again and the mattress buckled. He waved his arm to the thin muslin panel stretched like a window next to the bed. I had seen such things before in pleasure palaces and private rooms—a *finestra d'amore*; love's window. Sometimes the host's friends would watch him in a sex act, if the client liked to feel he was being watched. Or another couple would…well… couple in a chamber on the other side, sharing the sounds of their union. I had no problem with the concept normally—in fact, Signor Botticelli must have had quite a show if I remember some of the positions of last night; but suddenly I felt nervous. Watched by clients pleasuring themselves, fine; watched by an artist who was all set to immortalize me; unsettling.

I sat bolt upright and pulled two ropes of wheat blonde hair over my breasts in an unaccustomed gesture of modesty. Actually I should tell you *my* three facts since I've now mentioned two of them.

Primo fatto: I was named Luciana Vetra because I came from Venice as a baby in a bottle. True story; I'll tell you all about it sometime.

Secondo fatto: I have lots of golden hair—natural colour untouched by lemon juice, before you ask—waist length, with ringlets that have never seen a poker.

Terzo fatto: I have fantastic *tette*—round and firm and

small like cantaloupes. And they taste just as sweet according to my clients. But can you really believe what a man says about your breasts just before he spills his cuckoo spit?

'What do you say?' Bembo interrupted my musings.

I crashed back onto the pillows. 'I'll think about it.' I knew what Bembo wanted. He wanted everyone to see the panel so he could tell them that he'd fucked Flora.

'Perhaps this…' he tapped the pearl in my navel,'will help you think well of my request?' He was wheedling now.

I looked down at the glowing, milky gem and back at him. *That fucking pearl.* I knew I'd have to pay for it one day. 'Alright,' I said. 'Give me his address.'

And that's how I found myself by the Arno that day, all dressed up on the way to Sandro Botticelli's and badly needing a wee.