DAVID

MARY HOFFMAN

BLOOMSBURY

DAVID

MARY HOFFMAN

BLOOMSBURY

LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK SYDNEY

For Toby Sharp, a Giant fan

‘David with his sling, I with my bow.’

Michelangelo (fragment)

Chapter One

Blood and Milk

My brother died last month. No one bothered to tell me. But then, there is no one left alive who knows my real relationship with him. Of those who remember me in Florence, some say he was my master – which he was for a while, even though he didn't normally take apprentices. Others think I was his paramour, which is another way of saying they never knew him or us.

But when his nephew brought his body back to Florence, word reached me here in Settignano.

My dear brother was nearly eighty-nine. It would have been his birthday last week. So eighty-one and a half years since I came into the world and he was waiting to greet me. And to look after me.

And sixty years since that time when everyone in Florence knew who I was.

'David!' they would call, from every street corner and tavern. But that was not my real name.

Those three and a half years were the only ones in my life when I had what you might call adventures. It wasn't what I was expecting when I left our home in Settignano to find my brother and make my fortune in Florence.

I knew nothing of politics or the fads and fancies of great people like dukes and princes. Nothing about life at court or

the ways of grand ladies. But I was a quick learner and I soon found myself at the heart of conspiracies, plots and murders.

Now that he's gone, I can tell my story and I'll tell it like a proper story, even though there will be no 'once upon a time' and not exactly a 'happy ever after' either. But it's my story and no one else can tell it.

Florence, March 1501

The first thing I knew about life in the city was a knife at my throat and three ruffians at my back. I was tall and well-made then and could easily have fought them off if it hadn't been for the knife. First the prick of it drawing blood from my Adam's apple and then a swift slash that separated the pouch containing my small store of money from my belt. Then the three ran off laughing, leaving me like the stupid country boy I was, standing gawping down at the dangling leather purse strings.

'Welcome to the city, bumpkin!' one of them shouted and then they were far away.

I had set out on foot from Settignano later than I had meant. First there was my mother, with her endless messages and packages for my brother, then my five big sisters all smothering me with kisses and wailing that the family's baby was leaving home.

Baby! I was eighteen and a half years old and I had a girl waiting to waylay me on the dusty southern road out of the village. It took longer to disentangle myself from Rosalia than from any of the women in my family. And, truth to tell, I didn't really want to disentangle myself all that quickly. Rosalia was fifteen, plump and as rosy as her name, even though her hair and eyes were dark.

'Don't leave me, Gabriele,' she murmured when I eventually sat up and brushed the grass from my hair. 'I shall miss you so.' (I told you my name wasn't David.)

'I'm not leaving you,' I protested. 'I am going to the city to make my fortune. I'll be back in a year or so and then we can be married.'

'You'll forget me,' she said, sniffing a bit, 'once you've seen those grand ladies in the city, with their silks and velvets and precious jewels.'

'Not many of those left after the Mad Monk had his way,' I told her but she didn't really understand. She'd been a little girl of twelve when Savonarola built his bonfire of all the rich and luxurious goods he could make people yield up in the city. And only a year older when the Friar himself had burned in the same place.

If I knew little of city politics, Rosalia grasped even less.

She was so sure that I would meet a rich woman who would want to steal me from her that I felt touched. Before her, the only females who had told me I was handsome were my mother and sisters and I had no idea what was waiting for me in the big city. Rosalia turned out to be right in a way, but I didn't forget her completely – even though there were many temptations.

I thought about Rosalia, as I stood destitute in the shadow of the great cathedral that first night. There was nothing I could do except try to find my brother and I didn't even know if he would be there.

I had been to the city only a few times in my life and I wasn't sure how to get to where my brother lived. There hadn't really been a proper plan in my head when I set out and I was

beginning to realise how foolish this had been. I had made for the cathedral as the one landmark I remembered; you could see it from anywhere in the city.

That was another mistake because I had been gazing up at the huge cupola when those three villains jumped me. Now I trailed round to the front of the building and sat on the steps with my back to the rough facade. There was some bread and cheese in my bag and a leather bottle with a bit of wine left in it. At least I still had my bag. As well as a few changes of underwear and a spare shirt, it held my stonecutting tools and without them I wouldn't have a chance of earning any money.

But the plan, such as it was, had been to pay for a few nights' lodging to give me time to find news of my brother. And now I had nothing but a meagre supper and no money. So I sat on the steps and munched on my crust and watched the fashionable people parading between the Duomo and the Baptistery, cursing my stupidity and ill luck.

Gradually, I noticed that people were staring at me, both men and women. I supposed I looked a comical rustic figure sitting eating my humble meal in front of the grandest building in Europe. I began to blush and feel uncomfortable. Hastily, I stood up and brushed the crumbs off my jerkin, feeling I must move on, even though I had no idea where I might go to spend the night.

And then a young girl – a servant I supposed even though my Rosalia would have died to wear clothes of that quality – came up to me and whispered that I was sent for.

'Sent for?' I said. My first thought was that she bore a message from my brother but how would he have known I was there?

'My mistress sent me,' said the girl, pointing to a palazzo overlooking the cathedral square. There was a veiled figure at

a window on the first floor, from which she would have been able to watch me eating my bread and cheese.

'But what does she want with me?' I asked.

The girl smirked even though she was hardly more than a child. I felt myself blushing even more than before; Rosalia had been right. The women of the city were clearly without shame.

On the other hand, if this girl's mistress had taken a fancy to me, I would at least get shelter for the night – maybe even a little money to tide me over till I could find my brother.

I was innocent but not so innocent as not to understand what would be required of me in return. I followed the girl and let her lead me through in the grand wooden doors that formed the entrance to her mistress's palazzo.

Clarice de' Buonvicini turned out to be a young widow with two small daughters. She wasn't beautiful but she was very gracious and within a few minutes I felt like a coarse peasant with a dirty mind.

'I saw you alone and lost on the cathedral steps,' she said, 'and I wondered if you needed help.'

So I told her the whole story of my misadventure. She gave me sweet wine and biscuits and listened most sympathetically to my woes. And she was really interested when I told her about my brother.

'I didn't think he was in Florence at present,' said Clarice. 'But I have seen his wonderful crucifix in the church of Santo Spirito, and his fame reaches us from Rome.'

'He's not my blood brother,' I explained. I didn't want her to think I was claiming any tie with the Canossa family; I was clearly no aristocrat. 'We are milk-brothers only.'

'Ah,' was all she said to that.

She asked if I would dine with her and, since I was always hungry and the bread and cheese hadn't made much of a dent in my appetite, I accepted. But I was acutely aware of my rough clothes and my working man's hands, which seemed big and clumsy holding the stem of one of her wine glasses.

I swear she read my mind because she asked, hesitantly, with great delicacy, if I would like to wash, and change my clothes after my journey, then added since I had been robbed, would I care to wear something of her late husband's – we were much of a height, she said.

The maid, who was beginning to annoy me a bit with her knowing looks, laid out fine white silk hose and red velvet breeches and doublet on a bed in a chamber she led me to. Then she was back with a basin and ewer of hot water while I was still sitting on the bed in my undershirt, feeling the brocaded coverlet with my callused hands. She smirked again, looking at my bare legs.

I sent her on her way and was then glad of that hot, scented water. Once I was dressed in my borrowed finery I could almost believe myself worthy to sit at the lady's dinner table, if it hadn't been for my hands.

I nearly got lost trying to find my way from the chamber to the room where the lady was dining. I could have waited for the impudent servant to fetch me but I'd had enough of her. And my luck held: Clarice was in the second room whose door I tried.

She jumped up rather quickly when she saw me and put her hand to her heart as if I had startled her. Maybe I reminded her of her late husband, all dressed up in the dead man's clothes?

They seemed to be having an effect on me too, since I hurried to pick up her napkin and pull out her chair for her. We sat and ate together, talking of sculpture and marble and quarries and she was so interested in every detail of my life that what could have been an awkward evening passed off very smoothly.

We were waited on by liveried menservants and I was sure that one in particular was giving me nasty looks. Every time he poured me more wine or offered me a dish, I tried to hide my hands under my napkin. I was certain that he had the same vile thoughts about me as the lady's maid entertained.

But Clarice had been nothing but courteous to me. After dinner, she asked if I would do her the honour of accepting shelter under her roof for the night. In the morning she would send out to see if my brother could be found. When I nodded, she rang a bell and the maid came with a candlestick and showed me back to the chamber where I had changed my clothes.

I had drunk a lot of wine by then and fell on to the soft mattress with relief, discarding my fine clothes on the floor like a lout. I fell asleep almost immediately, thinking what a tale I would have to tell Rosalia and how she had been quite wrong about Florentine ladies.

But I had been asleep only a short time before I found myself having the most delicious dream. It was a warm night and I felt myself wrapped round by cool limbs. It was a heavenly embrace and I responded in my sleep like any healthy eighteen-year-old. It took some minutes before I realised that this was not a dream at all and the stately, elegant lady I had dined with had slipped naked into my bed.

Next morning she was gone and I wondered again if I had imagined the whole thing; had it been a wine-induced vision? I woke late, as I could tell from the angle of the sun shining through my shutters. I stood at the window wrapped in the brocade coverlet and saw that it gave on to an enclosed courtyard, not the cathedral square.

Down below, servants were hanging out washing, chopping herbs and gossiping. I imagined that several of them pointed up at the window and cackled with laughter. I jumped back quickly lest they see me. I looked round for my old clothes but they had gone; there was nothing for me to put on but yesterday's finery, which looked tawdry and ridiculous to me in the light of day.

How was I to escape? I still had no money and nowhere certain to stay in the city. I was now feeling very uncomfortable indeed and ashamed that I had betrayed Rosalia on my first night in the city.

There was a knock on my door and the maid came in with more hot water and my work clothes, washed and brushed, over her arm. I was so relieved that, firstly, I was not still naked and, secondly, I could change back into the stonecutter I was that I took no notice of her expression.

After changing my clothes, I tried to creep unobtrusively down the stairs but my lady came out of a room on the first floor and beckoned me to her. She gave me a very nice smile and she seemed altogether younger and more lively this morning. There could be only one reason for that and I had no idea how to speak to her or behave towards her.

Clarice, on the contrary, was completely composed.

'Good morning, Gabriele,' she said. 'I have some news for you.'

She beckoned me into her parlour and indicated a chair. I sat down awkwardly, once again very conscious of my rough clothes against the velvet upholstery.

'While you've been sleeping,' she said, 'my people have been out searching for information about the sculptor.'

I noticed she didn't refer to him as my brother. Perhaps she didn't take our relationship seriously now that I had explained it? Blood is thicker than milk, I suppose.

'And they have found that he is not currently in the city,' she continued.

My expression must have betrayed me because she touched my shoulder sympathetically. 'But he is expected any day,' she said. 'He has written to his father to say he is leaving Rome because of an expected commission here.'

My relief must have shown as clearly as my earlier disappointment. I had no ability to suppress my emotions at all – I was still too inexperienced to pretend.

'So you see,' she was saying, 'you can continue to stay with me until we hear he has arrived.'

I must have babbled something about not wanting to be a nuisance, but before I knew it the lady was in my lap kissing me, and I knew that she would have me stay, even if it meant stealing my clothes to keep me there.

There is a very efficient communication system in Florence between ladies of a certain rank. It operates through their servants and if men were anything like as well organised, then the city's politics would progress a lot more smoothly.

Women called at ladies' houses – to collect their laundry, curl and colour their hair, measure their waists for clothes

they were making, bring headdresses to sell them, and for many other reasons. And during their visits they talked, not so much with the ladies, who were reasonably discreet, but with their servants, who were anything but. And then their gossip passed from the servants to their mistresses.

I don't know how I knew it but I was sure that the ladies of Clarice de' Buonvicini's circle knew all about me and what I was doing in her palazzo. The maid – whose name turned out to be Vanna – would have told the laundress, who would have told a maid in another lady's house, who would have passed it on to a visiting hairdresser, and so on. And since it was only the very richest ladies in the grandest palazzos that had a specialist in to do their hair instead of leaving it to their maids, my name was soon being bandied about in the highest social circles.

At the time, I didn't know about the underground gossip network; I learned it much later from a servant-girl who was much more to my taste than Clarice's pert maid.

These ladies, who had been so starved of gossip as well as finery during the years when the Friar Savonarola preached against all the things that made their lives bearable, then began probing their sources of information and drawing their own conclusions. Clarice started to receive a lot of visitors.

At first, I was kept well out of their way and in fact time lay heavily on my hands. I was used to work – hard, physical work cutting stone and heaving huge blocks of it. My callused hands were a badge of my trade. But spending the days lounging in my lady's chamber was making them almost as soft as hers.

If I thought about the softness of my lady's hands, I was soon riddled with guilt about what they had been doing very recently, and in my idleness had too many moments in which

to think about my infidelity to Rosalia. so it was almost a relief to be summoned to meet Clarice's friends.

She insisted on my wearing her late husband's clothes all the time now. I didn't even know where my working clothes were.

I don't know how she explained my presence to her grand friends, but I was becoming more confident about handling a wine glass or a silver fork. And I didn't pretend to be a gentleman. If they asked, I told them my trade. But mostly they didn't talk to me; they talked about me. In whispers, to my lady and to each other.

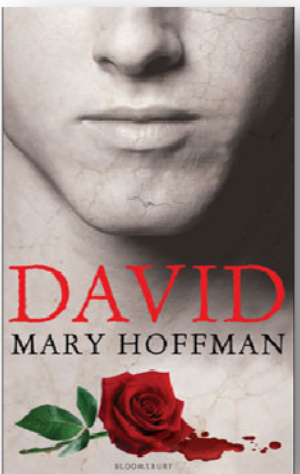
And it was in her parlour that I first heard murmurs that I would make a good artist's model. It wasn't the work I had come to Florence to do; I wouldn't have been so conceited about my looks. But several of these aristocratic ladies said they would like to own my portrait and I was becoming bold enough to think that some of them at least would have liked to possess the original.

I was getting better at suppressing my blushes but I was quite sure there would be more honour in posing for a great artist than in being handed from lady to lady like a lapdog.

And perhaps that was the beginning of the process that would end, three years later, in my becoming the best-known face and figure in Florence.

DAVID

MARY HOFFMAN



On sale

4th July 2011

ORDER YOUR COPY ONLINE:
WWW.BLOOMSBURY.COM/BOOKSHOP

Available as an eBook

Also by Mary Hoffman

Troubadour

The Falconer's Knot

The Stravaganza Sequence

City of Masks

City of Stars

City of Flowers

City of Secrets

City of Ships

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in July 2011 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

Copyright © Mary Hoffman 2011

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 0052 2

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc, Bungay, Suffolk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.bloomsbury.com