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Changeling

Written by

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Published by

Simon and Schuster

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Changeling

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SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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Simon and Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon and Schuster Australia, Sydney

Simon and Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue copy for this book is availabvle from the British Library.

HB ISBN: 978-0-85707-730-1
E-BOOK ISBN: 978-0-85707-733-2

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Printed and bound in Great Britain

ROME
JUNE 1453

The hammering on the door shot him into wakefulness like a handgun going off in his face. The young man scrambled for the dagger under his pillow, stumbling to his bare feet on the icy floor of the stone cell. He had been dreaming of his parents, of his old home, and he gritted his teeth against the usual wrench of longing for everything he had lost: the farmhouse, his mother, the old life.

The thunderous banging sounded again, and he held the dagger behind his back as he unbolted the door and cautiously opened it a crack. A dark-hooded figure stood outside, flanked by two heavy-set men, each carrying a burning torch. One of them raised his torch so the light fell on the slight dark-haired youth, naked to the waist, wearing only breeches, his hazel eyes blinking under a fringe of dark hair. He was about seventeen, with a face as sweet as a boy, but with the body of a young man forged by hard work.

'Luca Vero?'

'Yes.'

'You are to come with me.'

They saw him hesitate. 'Don't be a fool. There are three of us and only one of you and the dagger you're hiding behind your back won't stop us.'

'It's an order,' said the other man roughly. 'Not a request. And you are sworn to obedience.'

Luca had sworn obedience to his monastery, not to these strangers, but he had been expelled from there and now it seemed he must obey anyone who shouted an order. He turned to the bed, sat to pull on his boots, slipping the dagger into a scabbard hidden inside the soft leather, pulled on a linen shirt, and then threw his ragged woollen cape around his shoulders.

'Who are you?' he asked, coming unwillingly to the door.

The man made no answer, but simply turned and led the way, as the two guards waited in the corridor for Luca to come out of his cell and follow.

'Where are you taking me?'

The two guards fell in behind him without answering. Luca wanted to ask if he was under arrest, if he was being marched to a summary execution, but he did not dare. He was fearful of the very question; acknowledged to himself that he was

terrified of the answer. He could feel himself sweating with fear under his woollen cape, though the air was icy and the stone walls were cold and damp.

He knew that he was in the most serious trouble of his young life. Only yesterday four dark-hooded men had come and taken him from his monastery and brought him here, to this prison, without a word of explanation. He did not know where he was, or who was holding him. He did not know what charge he might face. He did not know what the punishment might be. He did not know if he was going to be beaten, tortured or killed.

'I insist on seeing a priest, I wish to confess...' he said.

They paid no attention to him at all, but pressed him on, down the narrow stone-flagged gallery. It was silent, with the closed doors of cells on either side. He could not tell if it was a prison or a monastery, it was so cold and quiet. It was just after midnight and the place was in darkness and utterly silent. Luca's guides made no noise as they walked along the gallery, down the stone steps, through a great hall, and then down a little spiral staircase, into a darkness that grew more and more black as the air grew more and more cold.

'I demand to know where you are taking me,' Luca insisted, but his voice shook with fear.

No-one answered him; but the guard behind him closed up a little.

At the bottom of the steps, Luca could just see a small arched doorway and a heavy wooden door. The leading man opened it with a key from his pocket and gestured that Luca should go through. When he hesitated, the guard behind him simply moved closer until the menacing bulk of his body pressed Luca onwards.

'I insist...' Luca breathed.

A hard shove thrust him through the doorway and he gasped as he found himself flung to the very edge of a high narrow quay, a boat rocking in the river a long way below, the far bank a dark blur in the distance. Luca flinched back from the brink. He had a sudden dizzying sense that they would be as willing to throw him over, onto the rocks below, as to take him down the steep stairs to the boat.

The first man went light-footed down the wet steps, stepped into the boat and said one word to the man who stood in the stern, holding the vessel against the current with the deft movements of a single oar. Then he looked back up to the handsome white-faced young man.

'Come,' he ordered.

Luca could do nothing else. He followed the man down the greasy steps,

clambered into the boat and seated himself in the prow. The boatman did not wait for the guards but turned his craft into the middle of the river and let the current sweep them around the city wall. Luca glanced down into the dark water. If he were to fling himself over the side of the boat he would be swept downstream – he might be able to swim with the current and make it to the other side and get away. But the water was flowing so fast he thought he was more likely to drown, if they did not come after him in the boat and knock him senseless with the oar.

'My lord,' he said, trying for dignity. 'May I ask you now where we are going?'

'You'll know soon enough,' came the terse reply.

The river ran like a wide moat around the tall walls of the city of Rome. The boatman kept the little craft close to the lee of the walls, hidden from the sentries above, then Luca saw ahead of them the looming shape of a stone bridge and, just before it, a grille set in an arched stone doorway of the wall. As the boat nosed inwards, the grille slipped noiselessly up and, with one practised push of the oar, they shot inside, into a torch-lit cellar.

With a deep lurch of fear Luca wished that he had taken his chance with the river. There were half-a-dozen grim-faced men waiting for him and, as the boatman held a well-worn ring on the wall to steady the craft, they reached down and hauled Luca out of the boat, to push him down a narrow corridor.

Luca felt, rather than saw, thick stone walls on either side, smooth wooden floorboards underfoot, heard his own breathing, ragged with fear, then they paused before a heavy wooden door, struck it with a single knock and waited.

A voice from inside the room said 'Come!' and the guard swung the door open and thrust Luca inside. Luca stood, heart pounding, blinking at the sudden brightness of dozens of wax candles, and heard the door close silently behind him. A solitary man was sitting at a table, papers before him. He wore a robe of rich velvet in so dark a blue that it appeared almost black, the hood completely concealing his face from Luca, who stood before the table and swallowed down his fear. Whatever happened, he decided, he was not going to beg for his life. Somehow, he would find the courage to face whatever was coming.

CASTLE LUCRETILI
JUNE 1453

At about the time that Luca was being questioned, a young woman was seated in a rich chair in the chapel of her family home, the Castle of Lucretili, about twenty miles north-east of Rome, her dark blue eyes fixed on the rich crucifix, her fair hair twisted in a careless plait under a black veil, her face strained and pale. A candle in a rose crystal bowl flickered on the altar as the priest moved in the shadows. She knelt, her hands clasped tightly together, praying fervently for her father, who was fighting for his life in his bed-chamber, refusing to see her.

The door at the back of the chapel opened and her brother came in quietly, saw her bowed head and went to kneel beside her. She looked sideways to him, a handsome young man, dark-haired, dark-browed, his young face stern with grief.

'He's gone, Isolde, he's gone. May he rest in peace.'

Her white face crumpled and she put her hands over her eyes. 'He didn't ask for me? Not even at the end?'

'He didn't want you to see him in pain. He wanted you to remember him as he had been, strong and healthy. But his last words were to send you his blessing, and his last thoughts were of your future.'

She shook her head. 'I can't believe he would not give me his blessing.'

Giorgio turned from her and spoke to the priest, who hurried at once to the back of the chapel. Isolde heard the big bell start to toll; everyone would know that the great crusader, the Lord of Lucretili, was dead.

'I must pray for him,' she said quietly. 'You'll bring his body here?'
He nodded.

'I will share the vigil tonight,' she decided. 'I will sit beside him now that he is dead though he didn't allow it while he lived.' She paused. 'He didn't leave me a letter? Nothing?'

'His will,' her brother said softly. 'He planned for you. At the very end of his life he was thinking of you.'

She nodded, her dark blue eyes filling with tears, then she knelt on the stone floor, clasped her hands together, and prayed for her father's soul.

Isolde spent the first long night of her father's death in a silent vigil beside his coffin, which lay in the family chapel. Four of his men at arms stood, one at each point of the compass, their heads bowed over their broadswords, the candlelight from the tall wax candles glittering on the holy water that had been sprinkled on the coffin lid.

Isolde, dressed in white, knelt before the coffin all night long until dawn when the priest came to say Prime, the first office of prayers of the day. Only then did she rise up and let her ladies-in-waiting help her to her room to sleep, until a message from her brother told her that she must get up and show herself, it was time for dinner and the household would want to see their lady.

She did not hesitate. She had been raised to do her duty by the great household and she had a sense of obligation to the people who lived on the lands of Lucretili. Her father, she knew, had left the castle and the lands to her; these people were in her charge. They would want to see her at the head of the table, they would want to see her enter the great hall. Even if her eyes were red from crying over the loss of a very beloved father, they would expect her to dine with them. Her father himself would have expected it. She would not fail them or him.

There was a sudden hush as she entered the great hall where the servants were sitting at trestle tables, talking quietly, waiting for dinner to be served. More than two hundred men at arms, servants and grooms, filled the hall, where the smoke from the central fire coiled up to the darkened beams of the high ceiling.

As soon as the men saw Isolde, followed by the three women of her household, they rose to their feet and pulled their hats from their heads, and bowed low to honour the daughter of the late Lord of Lucretili, and the heiress to the castle.

Isolde was wearing the deep blue of mourning: a high conical hat draped in indigo lace hiding her fair hair, a priceless belt of Arabic gold worn tightly at the high waist of her gown, the keys to the castle on a gold chain at her side. Behind her came her women companions, firstly Ishraq, her childhood friend, wearing Moorish dress, a long tunic over loose pantaloons, with a long veil over her head held lightly across her face, so that only her dark eyes were visible as she looked around the hall. Two other women followed behind her and as the household whispered their blessings on Isolde, the women took their seats at the ladies' table to the side of the raised dais. Isolde went up the shallow stairs to the great table, and recoiled at the

sight of her brother in the wooden chair, as grand as a throne, that had been their father's seat. She knew that she should have anticipated he would be there, just as he knew that she would inherit this castle and would take the great chair as soon as the will was read. But she was dull with grief, and she had not thought that from now on she would always see her brother where her father ought to be. She was so new to grief that she had not yet fully realised that she would never see her father again.

Giorgio smiled blandly at her, and gestured that she should take her seat at his right hand, where she used to sit beside her father.

'And you will remember Prince Roberto.' Giorgio indicated a fleshy man with a round sweating face on his left, who rose and came around the table to bow to her. Isolde gave her hand to the prince and looked questioningly at her brother.

'He has come to sympathise with us for our loss.'

The prince kissed her hand and Isolde tried not to flinch from the damp touch of his lips. He looked at her as if he wanted to whisper something, as if they might share a secret. Isolde took back her hand, and bent towards her brother's ear. 'I am surprised you have a guest at dinner when my father died only yesterday.'

'It was good of him to come at once,' Giorgio said, beckoning the servers who came down the hall, their trays held at shoulder height loaded with game, meat, and fish dishes, great loaves of bread and flagons of wine and jugs of ale.

The castle priest sang grace and then the servers banged down the trays of food, the men drew their daggers from their belts and their boots to carve their portions of meat, and heaped slices of thick brown bread with poached fish, and stewed venison.

It was hard for Isolde to eat dinner in the great hall as if nothing had changed, when her dead father lay in his vigil, guarded in the chapel by his men at arms, and would be buried the next day. She found that tears kept blurring the sight of the servants coming in, carrying more food for each table, banging down jugs of small ale, and bringing the best dishes and flagons of best red wine to the top table where Giorgio and his guest the prince served themselves and sent the rest down the hall to those men who had served them well during the day. The prince and her brother ate a good dinner and called for more wine. Isolde picked at her food and glanced down to the women's table, where Ishraq met her gaze with silent sympathy.

When they had finished, and the sugared fruits and marchpane had been offered to the top table, and taken away, Giorgio touched her hand. 'Don't go to

your rooms just yet,' he said. 'I want to talk to you.'

Isolde nodded to dismiss Ishraq and her ladies from their dining table and send them back to the ladies' rooms, then she went through the little door behind the dais to the private room where the Lucretili family sat after dinner. A fire was burning against the wall and there were three chairs drawn up around it. A flagon of wine was set ready for the men, a glass of small ale for Isolde. As she took her seat the two men came in together.

'I want to talk to you about our father's will,' Giorgio said, once they were seated.

Isolde glanced towards Prince Roberto.

'Roberto is concerned in this,' Giorgio explained. 'When Father was dying he said that his greatest hope was to know that you would be safe and happy. He loved you very dearly.'

Isolde pressed her fingers to her cold lips and blinked the tears from her eyes.

'I know,' her brother said gently. 'I know you are grieving. But you have to know that Father made plans for you and gave to me the sacred trust of carrying them out.'

'Why didn't he tell me so himself?' she asked. 'Why would he not talk to me? We always talked of everything together. I know what he planned for me; he said if I chose not to marry then I was to live here, I would inherit this castle and you would have his castle and lands in France. We agreed this. We all three agreed this.'

'We agreed it when he was well,' Giorgio said patiently. 'But when he became sick and fearful, he changed his mind. And then he could not bear for you to see him so very ill and in so much pain. When he thought about you then, with the very jaws of death opening before him, he thought better of his first plan. He wanted to be certain that you would be safe. Then, he planned well for you – he suggested that you marry Prince Roberto here, and agreed that we should take a thousand crowns from the treasury as your dowry.'

It was a tiny payment for a woman who had been raised to think of herself as heiress to this castle, the fertile pastures, the thick woods, the high mountains. Isolde gaped at him. 'Why so little?'

'Because the prince here has done us the honour of indicating that he will accept you just as you are – with no more than a thousand crowns in your pocket.'

'And you shall keep it all,' the man assured her, pressing her hand as it rested on the arm of her chair. 'You shall have it to spend on whatever you want. Pretty things for a pretty princess.'

Isolde looked at her brother, her dark blue eyes narrowing as she understood what this meant. 'A dowry as small as this will mean that no-one else will offer for me,' she said. 'You know that. And yet you did not ask for more? You did not warn Father that this would leave me without any prospects at all? And Father? Did he want to force me to marry the prince?'

The prince put his hand on his fleshy chest and cast his eyes modestly down. 'Most ladies would not require forcing,' he pointed out.

'I know of no better husband that you might have,' Giorgio said smoothly. His friend smiled and nodded at her. 'And Father thought so too. We agreed this dowry with Prince Roberto and he was so pleased to marry you that he did not specify that you should bring a greater fortune than this. There is no need to accuse anyone of failing to guard your interests. What could be better for you than marriage to a family friend, a prince, and a wealthy man?'

It took her only a moment to decide. 'I cannot think of marriage,' Isolde said flatly. 'Forgive me, Prince Roberto. But it is too soon after my father's death. I cannot bear even to think of it, let alone talk of it.'

'We have to talk of it,' Giorgio insisted. 'The terms of our father's will are that we have to get you settled. He would not allow any delay. Either immediate marriage to my friend here, or...' He paused.

'Or what?' Isolde asked, suddenly afraid.

'The abbey,' he said simply. 'Father said that if you would not marry, I was to appoint you as abbess and that you should go there to live.'

'Never!' Isolde exclaimed. 'My father would never have done this to me!'

Giorgio nodded. 'I too was surprised, but he said that it was the future he had planned for you all along. That was why he did not fill the post when the last abbess died. He was thinking even then, a year ago, that you must be kept safe. You can't be exposed to the dangers of the world, left here alone at Lucretili. If you don't want to marry, you must be kept safe in the abbey.'

Prince Roberto smiled slyly at her. 'A nun or a princess,' he suggested. 'I would think you would find it easy to choose.'

Isolde jumped to her feet. 'I cannot believe Father planned this for me,' she said. 'He never suggested anything like this. He was clear he would divide the lands

between us. He knew how much I love it here; how I love these lands and know these people. He said he would will this castle and the lands to me, and give you our lands in France.'

Giorgio shook his head as if in gentle regret. 'No, he changed his mind. As the oldest child, the only son, the only true heir, I will have everything, both in France and here, and you, as a woman, will have to leave.'

'Giorgio, my brother, you cannot send me from my home?'

He spread his hands. 'There is nothing I can do. It is our father's last wish and I have it in writing, signed by him. You will either marry – and no-one will have you but Prince Roberto – or you will go to the abbey. It was good of him to give you this choice. Many fathers would simply have left orders.'

Isolde rose to her feet. 'Excuse me,' she said, her voice shaking as she fought to control her anger. 'I shall leave you and go to my rooms and think about this.'

'Don't take too long!' Prince Roberto said, with an intimate smile, 'I won't wait too long.'

'I shall give you my answer tomorrow.' She paused in the doorway, and looked back at her brother. 'May I see my father's letter?'

Giorgio nodded and drew it from inside his jacket. 'You can keep this. It is a copy. I have the other in safe-keeping; there is no doubt as to his wishes. You will have to consider not whether you will obey him, but only *how* you obey him. He knew that you would obey him.'

'I know,' she said. 'I am his daughter. Of course I will obey him.'

ABBEY OF LUCRETILI
OCTOBER 1453

A few months later, Luca was on the road from Rome, riding east, wearing a plain working robe and cape of ruddy brown, and newly equipped with a horse of his own.

He was accompanied by his servant Freize, a broad-shouldered, square-faced youth, just out of his teens, who had plucked up his courage when Luca left their monastery, and volunteered to work for the young man, and follow him wherever the quest might take him. The abbot had been doubtful, but Freize had convinced him that his skills as a kitchen lad were so poor, and his love of adventure so strong, that he would serve God better by following a remarkable master on a secret quest ordained by the Pope himself, than by burning the bacon for the long-suffering monks. The abbot, secretly glad to lose the challenging young novice priest, thought the loss of an accident-prone spit lad was a small price to pay.

Freize rode a strong cob and led a donkey laden with their belongings. At the rear of the little procession was a surprise addition to their partnership: a clerk, Brother Peter, who had been ordered to travel with them at the last moment, to keep a record of their work.

'A spy,' Freize muttered out of the side of his mouth to his new master. 'A spy if ever I saw one. Pale-faced, soft hands, trusting brown eyes: the shaved head of a monk and yet the clothes of a gentleman. A spy without a doubt.

'Is he spying on me? No, for I don't do anything and know nothing. Who is he spying on, then? Must be the young master, my little sparrow. For there is no-one else but the horses and they're not heretics, nor pagans. They are the only honest beasts here.'

'He is here to serve as my clerk,' Luca replied irritably. 'And I have to have him whether I need a clerk or no. So hold your tongue.'

'Do *I* need a clerk?' Freize asked himself as he reined in his horse and dropped behind the two men. 'No. For I do nothing and know nothing and, if I did, I wouldn't write it down – not trusting words on a page. Also, not being able to read or write would likely prevent me.'

'Fool,' the clerk Peter said as he rode by.

'"Fool," he says,' Freize remarked to his horse's ears and to the gently

climbing road before them. 'Easy to say: hard to prove. And, anyway, I have been called worse.'

They had been riding all day on a track little more than a narrow path for goats, which wound upwards out of the fertile valley, alongside little terraced slopes growing olives and vines, and then higher into the woodland where the huge beech trees were turning gold and bronze. At sunset, when the arching skies above them went rosy pink, the clerk drew a paper from the inner pocket of his jacket. 'I was ordered to give you this at sunset,' he said. 'Forgive me if it is bad news. I don't know what it says.'

'Who gave it you?' Luca asked. The seal on the back of the folded letter was shiny and smooth, unmarked with any crest.

'The lord who hired me, the same lord who commands you,' Peter said. 'This is how your orders will come. He tells me a day and a time, or sometimes a destination, and I give you your orders then and there.'

'Got them tucked away in your pocket all the time?' Freize inquired.

Grandly, the clerk nodded.

'Could always turn him upside down and shake him,' Freize remarked quietly to his master.

'We'll do this as we are ordered to do it,' Luca replied, looping the reins of his horse casually around his shoulder to leave his hands free to break the seal to open the folded paper. 'It's an instruction to go to the abbey of Lucretili,' he said.

'The abbey is set between two houses, a nunnery and a monastery. I am to investigate the nunnery. They are expecting us.' He folded the letter and gave it back to Peter.

'Does it say how to find them?' Freize asked gloomily. 'For otherwise it's bed under the trees and nothing but cold bread for supper. Beechnuts, I suppose. All you could eat of beechnuts. You could go mad with gluttony on them. I suppose I might get lucky and find us a mushroom.'

'The road is just up ahead,' Peter interrupted. 'The abbey is near to the castle. I should think we can claim hospitality at either monastery or nunnery.'

'We'll go to the convent,' Luca ruled. 'It says that they are expecting us.'

It did not look as if the convent was expecting anyone. It was growing dark, but there were no warm welcoming lights showing and no open doors. The shutters were closed at all the windows in the outer wall, and only narrow beams of flickering

candlelight shone through the slats. In the darkness they could not tell how big it was; they just had a sense of great walls marching off either side of the wide-arched entrance gateway. A dim horn lantern was hung by the small arched doorway set in the great wooden gate, throwing a thin yellow light downward, and when Freize dismounted and hammered on the wooden gate with the handle of his dagger they could hear someone inside protesting at the noise and then opening a little spy hole in the door, to peer out at them.

'I am Luca Vero, with my two servants,' Luca shouted. 'I am expected. Let us in.'

The spy hole slammed shut, then they could hear the slow unbolting of the gate and the lifting of wooden bars and, finally, one side of the gate creaked reluctantly open. Freize led his horse and the donkey, and Luca and Peter rode into the cobbled yard as a sturdy woman-servant pushed the gate shut behind them. The men dismounted and looked around as a wizened old lady in a habit of grey wool, with a tabard of grey tied at her waist by a plain rope, held up the torch she was carrying, to inspect the three of them.

'Are you the man they sent to make inquiry? For if you are not, and it is hospitality that you want, you had better go on to the monastery, our brother house,' she said to Peter, looking at him and his fine horse. 'This house is in troubled times, we don't want guests.'

'No, I am to write the report. I am the clerk to the inquiry. This is Luca Vero, he is here to inquire.'

'A boy!' she exclaimed scornfully. 'A beardless boy?'

Luca flushed in irritation, then swung his leg over the neck of his horse, and jumped down to the ground, throwing the reins to Freize. 'It doesn't matter how many years I have, or if I have a beard or not. I am appointed to make inquiry here, and I will do so tomorrow. In the meantime we are tired and hungry and you should show me to the refectory and to the guest rooms. Please inform the Lady Abbess that I am here and will see her after Prime tomorrow.'

'Hoity-toity,' the old woman remarked, holding up her torch to take another look at Luca's handsome young face, flushed under his dark fringe, his hazel eyes bright with anger.

'Hoity-toity, is it?' Freize questioned the horse as he led him to the stables ahead. 'A virgin so old that she is like a pickled walnut and she calls the little lord a beardless boy? And him a genius and perhaps a changeling?'

'You, take the horses to the stables and the lay sister there will take you to the kitchen,' she snapped with sudden energy at Freize. 'You can eat and sleep in the barn. You—' She took in the measure of Peter the clerk and judged him superior to Freize but still wanting. 'You can dine in the kitchen gallery. You'll find it through that doorway. They'll show you where to sleep in the guesthouse. You—' She turned to Luca. 'You, the inquirer, I will show to the refectory and to your own bedroom. They said you were a priest?'

'I have not yet said my vows,' he said. 'I am in the service of the Church, but I am not ordained.'

'Too handsome by far for the priesthood, and with his tonsure grown out already,' she said to herself. To Luca she said: 'You can sleep in the rooms for the visiting priest, anyway. And in the morning I will tell my Lady Abbess that you are here.'

She was leading the way to the refectory when a lady came through the archway from the inner cloister. Her habit was made of the softest bleached wool, the wimple on her head pushed back to show a pale lovely face with smiling grey eyes. The girdle at her waist was of the finest leather and she had soft leather slippers, not the rough wooden pattens that working women wore to keep their shoes out of the mud.

'I came to greet the inquirer,' she said, holding up the set of wax candles in her hand.

Luca stepped forwards. 'I am the inquirer,' he said.

She smiled, taking in his height, his good looks and his youth in one swift gaze. 'Let me take you to your dinner, you must be weary. Sister Anna here will see that your horses are stabled and your men comfortable.'

He bowed and she turned ahead of him, leaving him to follow her through the stone archway, along a flagged gallery that opened into the arching refectory room. At the far end, near the fire that was banked in for the night, a place had been laid for one person; there was wine in the glass, bread on the plate, a knife and spoon either side of a bowl. Luca sighed with pleasure and sat down in the chair as a maidservant came in with a ewer and bowl to wash his hands, good linen to dry them, and behind her came a kitchen maid with a bowl of stewed chicken and vegetables.

'You have everything that you need?' the lady asked.

'Thank you,' he said awkwardly. He was uncomfortable in her presence; he

had not spoken to a woman other than his mother since he had been sworn into the monastery at the age of eleven. 'And you are?'

She smiled at him and he realised in the glow of her smile that she was beautiful. 'I am Sister Ursula, the Lady Almoner, responsible for the management of the abbey. I am glad you have come. I have been very anxious. I hope you can tell us what is happening and save us...'

'Save you?'

'This is a long-established and beautiful nunnery,' Sister Ursula said earnestly. 'I joined it when I was just a little girl. I have served God and my sisters here for all my life, I have been here for more than twenty years. I cannot bear the thought that Satan has entered in.'

Luca dipped his bread in the rich thick gravy, and concentrated on the food to hide his consternation. 'Satan?'

She crossed herself, a quick unthinking gesture of devotion. 'Some days I think it really is that bad, other days I think I am like a foolish girl, frightening myself with shadows.' She gave him a shy, apologetic smile. 'You will be able to judge. You will discover the truth of it all. But if we cannot rid ourselves of the gossip we will be ruined: no family will send their daughters to us, and now the farmers are starting to refuse to trade with us. It is my duty to make sure that the abbey earns its own living, that we sell our goods and farm produce in order to buy what we need. I can't do that if the farmers' wives refuse to speak with us when I send my lay sisters with our goods to market. We can't trade if the people will neither sell to us nor buy from us.' She shook her head. 'Anyway, I will leave you to eat. The kitchen maid will show you to your bedroom in the guesthouse when you have finished eating. Bless you, my brother.'

Luca suddenly realised he had quite forgotten to say grace: she would think he was an ignorant mannerless hedge friar. He had stared at her like a fool and stammered when he spoke to her. He had behaved like a young man who had never seen a beautiful woman before and not at all like a man of some importance, come to head a papal inquiry. What must she think of him? 'Bless you, Lady Almoner,' he said awkwardly.

She bowed, hiding a little smile at his confusion, and walked slowly from the room, and he watched the sway of the hem of her gown as she left.

On the east side of the enclosed abbey, the shutter of the ground-floor window was

slightly open so that two pairs of eyes could watch the Lady Almoner's candle illuminate her pale silhouette as she walked gracefully across the yard and then vanished into her house.

'She's greeted him, but she won't have told him anything,' Isolde whispered.

'He will find nothing unless someone helps him,' Ishraq agreed.

The two drew back from the window and noiselessly closed the shutter. 'I wish I could see my way clear,' Isolde said. 'I wish I knew what to do. I wish I had someone who could advise me.'

'What would your father have done?'

Isolde laughed shortly. 'My father would never have let himself be forced in here. He would have laid down his life before he allowed someone to imprison him. Or, if captured, he would have died attempting to escape. He wouldn't just have sat here, like a doll, like a cowardly girl, crying for missing him and not knowing what to do.'

She turned away and roughly rubbed her eyes. Ishraq put a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'Don't blame yourself,' she said. 'There was nothing we could do when we first came here. And now that the whole abbey is falling apart around us, we can still do nothing until we understand what is going on. But everything is changing even while we wait, powerless. Even if we do nothing; something is going to happen. This is our chance. Perhaps this is the moment when the door swings open. We're going to be ready for our chance.'

Isolde took the hand from her shoulder and held it against her cheek. 'At least I have you.'

'Always.'

Luca slept heavily; not even the church bell tolling the hour in the tower above his head could wake him. But, just when the night was darkest, before three in the morning, a sharp scream cut through his sleep and then he heard the sound of running feet.

Luca was up and out of his bed in a moment, his hand snatching for the dagger under his pillow, peering out of his window at the dark yard. A glint of moonlight shining on the cobblestones showed him a woman in white racing across the yard to scrabble at the beams barring the heavy wooden gate. Three women pursued her, and the old porteress came running out of the gatehouse and grabbed the woman's hands as she clawed like a cat at the timbers.

The other women were quick to catch the girl from behind and Luca heard her sharp wail of despair as they grabbed hold of her, and saw her knees buckle as she went down under their weight. He pulled on his breeches and boots, threw a cape over his naked shoulders, then sprinted from his room, out into the yard, tucking the dagger out of sight in the scabbard in his boot. He stepped back into the shadow of the building, certain they had not noticed him, determined to see their faces in the shadowy light of the moon, so that he would know them, when he saw them again.

The porteress held up her torch as they lifted the girl, two women holding her shoulders, the third supporting her legs. As they carried her past him, Luca shrank back into the concealing darkness of the doorway. They were so close that he could hear their panting breaths, one of them was sobbing quietly.

It was the strangest sight. The girl's hand had swung down as they lifted her; now she was quite unconscious. It seemed that she had fainted when they had pulled her from the barred gate. Her head was rolled back, the little laces from her nightcap brushing the ground as they carried her, her long nightgown trailing in the dust. But it was no normal fainting fit. She was as limp as a corpse, her eyes closed, her young face serene. Then Luca gave a little hiss of horror. The girl's swinging hand was pierced in the palm, the wound oozing blood. They had folded her other hand across her slight body and Luca could see a smudge of blood on her nightgown. She had the hands of a girl crucified. Luca froze where he stood, forcing himself to stay hidden in the shadows, unable to look away from the strange terrible wounds. And then he saw something that seemed even worse.

All three women carrying the sleeping girl wore her expression of rapt serenity. As they shuffled along, carrying their limp, bleeding burden, all three were slightly smiling, all three were radiant as if with an inner secret joy.

And their eyes were closed like hers.

Luca waited till they had sleepwalked past him, steady as pall-bearers, then he went back into the guesthouse room and knelt at the side of his bed, praying fervently for guidance to somehow find the wisdom, despite his self-doubt, to discover what was so very wrong in this holy place, and put it right.



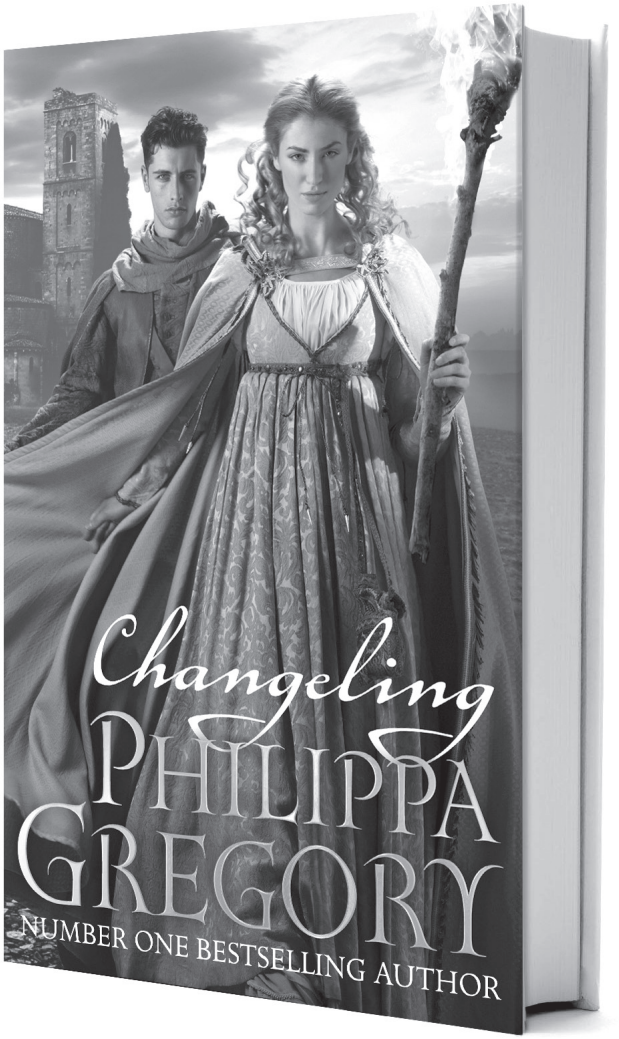
PHILIPPA GREGORY was an established historian and writer when she discovered her interest in the Tudor period and wrote the internationally bestselling novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*. She has since gone on to write several bestselling novels, including her The Cousin's War sequence for Simon & Schuster, and is now diversifying into YA with this new series of historical novels for a teen audience, entitled *Order of Darkness*. Philippa's other great interest is the charity that she founded nearly twenty years ago: Gardens for The Gambia. She has raised funds and paid for 140 wells for the primary schools of this poor African country.

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24th May 2012
Hardback £12.99

ISBN: 978-0-85707-730-1
E-BOOK ISBN: 978-0-85707-733-2