



- PART I -

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THE DAVID

FLORENCE, 1517

The mud was from the banks of the Arno river. But also, it was from the banks of the Arno river *inside* the city walls, so it was probably not entirely mud. It really *stank* like not-entirely-mud in Cat's hand. But she'd touched worse in her life. And anyway, Gio had dared her.

She followed the carriage.

They'd entered the city through the Porta Romana, which Cat thought was silly. It was a big, fancy carriage, covered in gold and paint and stuff like that, and it was supposed to be full of fancy people too. Shouldn't fancy people know that the Porta Romana was one long snarl of people and carts at this time of day? Or maybe they were too rich to care about that sort of thing.

They weren't too rich not to care about *everything*, though. Cat hung in the shadows as the carriage paused in front of Signore Bruno's bakery, the one that sold the ciambelle that Gio sometimes stole. It was a two-story shop front, and Signore Bruno was perched on a ladder outside. He had a chisel and a bucket of soapy water, and he was scraping at the printed paper that had been pasted to his wall. Cat shrank further back when she saw the two City Guards at the base of Signore Bruno's ladder, keeping careful watch on him.

The carriage's velvet curtain twitched aside. The hand that pulled it sparkled in the sunlight, just as shiny as the carriage. Cat caught a glimpse of a stormy frown before the curtain settled back. A moment later, two of the Medici Guardsmen strode toward the City Guards. Someone inside the carriage thumped on the roof, and the driver urged the horses forward. Cat hurried to keep up

as, behind her, an argument broke out between the two sets of uniformed men.

There was still one last scrap of paper clinging to the wall despite Signore Bruno's scrubbing. And Cat was picking up some letters these days. *Reppublica*. That's what it said.

Cat grinned and forged onward.

They were headed into the Piazza della Signoria, a giant plaza in the center of Florence. It was one of Cat's favorite parts of the city. She liked the way the cobblestones sprawled in every direction. She liked the sweeping arches of the Loggia dei Lanzi. And she *loved* the gleaming white marble of the statue of *David*, which towered before the Palazzo Vecchio's front entrance.

The murmurs began as the carriage rolled out into the Piazza. In ones and twos, and then in bigger groups, the crowd turned their faces toward the crest on the carriage doors. "*The Medici?*" Cat heard them whisper as she passed. "*Has the Pope returned?*"

Almost as though they'd heard the question, the curtains of the fancy carriage opened, pulled back by that same bejeweled hand. There were no troubled frowns now—just a man draped in purples and golds, with beneficent eyes and an indulgent smile.

"But you said he was a Medici," Cat had protested earlier that day. "How can he be the Pope if he's also a Medici?"

The look Gio had given her said quite clearly that only babies asked stupid questions like that, and that ten-year-olds like Gio didn't have time for babies.

"My beloved Florence!" Pope Leo X—or maybe Giovanni de' Medici—declared. His voice carried. "I am home!"

The reaction was immediate. The Piazza burst into cheers, pushing forward to get a better look at the carriage. Cat let herself be swept along, taking advantage of the path that the stink emanating from her right hand carved for her.

Guards in Medici blue had sprung into action by the time Cat made it to the front of the mob, shoving people away from the horses. They didn't pay much mind to Cat. Who would notice a little girl in a crowd of grasping adults?

"I am gratified by your warmth and love," the Pope said. His voice carried across the Piazza. "My dear cousin had assured me of your welcome, but it is quite another thing to witness it in person! Would you greet your people, Giulio?"

There was a spindly silhouette in the carriage at the Pope's shoulder. He did not move forward into the sunlight. The Pope rolled his eyes. "That is Cardinal de' Medici for you."

An old woman in a gray shawl had managed to get to the carriage window. "Your Holiness!" she croaked, reaching for the Pope's hand. Cat saw the man shoot a disgusted glance back into the carriage, toward his angular companion. He pulled back out of her reach, sketching a quick sign of the cross over her head.

"Thank you," the old woman called. She fell back from the window, a few tears rolling down her cheek.

"Bless this city," called the Pope. "And bless every soul within it!"

Cat threw shit at him.

She did not have the best aim. The ball of muck hit the edge of the window. But it exploded with a gratifying splatter all across the shiny robes, and the Pope staggered back into his fancy carriage with a "Jesus Christ!" that would have gotten Cat's ears boxed.

"Who threw that?" thundered the captain of the Medici Guard. He wheeled his horse between the carriage and the crowd. But even his bellows weren't loud enough to drown out the "*Look at me, Giulio, I'm covered in filth!*" that caterwauled out from the carriage window.

Shock rippled through the crowd, murmurs that grew and grew. Someone shoved Cat back, until the carriage was blocked from sight behind a set of broad shoulders.

“I want them caught! I want them flogged!” the Medici Pope was wailing. But it was harder and harder to hear him over the growing shouts of the crowd. People were no longer cheering, or at least not all of them were.

“Long live the Republic!” The chant rang from every corner of the Piazza until it was deafening. “Long live the Republic!”

It occurred to Cat that she maybe hadn't thought about how to get away. This was especially a problem because of the men in Medici blue who were starting to thread through the crowd, shoving past onlookers. Looking for someone.

Looking for her.

Cat gulped and turned. But the current that had bobbed her all the way to the Medici carriage was working against her now. It was like the Piazza had become a wall of legs and torsos, and nobody seemed eager to budge for the girl with the smelly hands. Not when the guards were closing in. Not until—

A path opened. Just for a moment. And, at the end of it, Cat saw a lifeline.

Without hesitating, she dove into the chaos of Florence and let herself be saved.