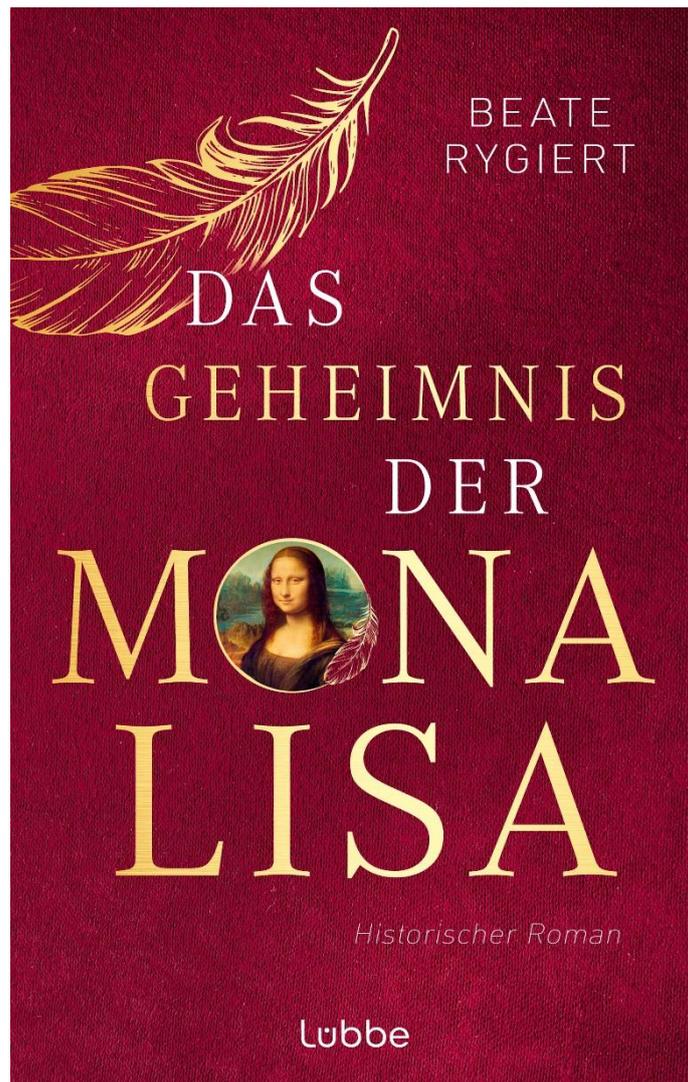


Beate Rygiert
THE SECRET OF THE MONA LISA

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



Historical Novel
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Author's Note on the Novel:

Ever since I first stood before Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa in Paris many years ago, I've been captivated by the question: who was this woman? And why did Leonardo keep working on this painting right up until shortly before his death? What did this work mean to the artist? And where does the fascination come from, not only for me but for millions of others who are entranced by it? What lies behind the smile of the Mona Lisa?

There has been and still is much debate about the identity of the woman depicted in the painting. While we know the identities of most of the prominent models for his other female portraits, Leonardo never revealed the name of this particular woman. The only statement he made about it is passed down to us by Antonio de Beatis, who, along with Luigi von Aragon, visited the master in France in 1517, two years before his death. Leonardo is said to have answered the question of who the portrait represents by saying it was a Florentine lady, and that the portrait was a commission from Giuliano de' Medici. At the same time, from the start, the painting was referred to as "*La Gioconda*" in France. Regardless of this, Giorgio Vasari, in his famous "*Lives*," the first comprehensive artist biographies of his time, mentioned that Leonardo had portrayed Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of the wealthy silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who was well-acquainted with the artist through Leonardo's father. These two statements appear contradictory and continue to provoke heated discussions. The question remains: why would Giuliano de' Medici, who was already in exile at the time of the painting's creation, commission a portrait of the wife of a Florentine silk merchant?

With my theory that Lisa and Giuliano might have known each other, even loved each other, I bridge the gap between these seemingly conflicting theories. What if Giuliano and Lisa had been secret lovers before the expulsion of the Medici from Florence? What if Giuliano's commission to Leonardo to portray Lisa was motivated by something entirely different from the usual one? What if neither Giuliano nor Lisa's husband was actually concerned about the painting? After all, Leonardo never let it out of his hands. Why was this?

I've been delving into the Italian Renaissance, particularly in Florence, for many years, ever since I spent a semester studying in this wonderful city. I'm well-acquainted with the gripping history of the Medici, who were of central importance to the fate of the city. As a painter, I'm interested in painting techniques that were used and developed during the Renaissance. And of course, I'm fascinated by the exceptional genius Leonardo da Vinci, who was far ahead of his time in many ways, not just because of his artworks and inventions. He was a "modern" individual, grappling with timeless questions about the meaning of life and the depth of the human psyche, much as we are today.

Beate Rygiert, Forbach, August 2023

Exposé

'The Secret of the Mona Lisa' tells the story of the creation of the world's most famous painting, intricately intertwined with a daring political intrigue.

Lisa and Giuliano - The Foiled Escape

Florence 1494: Fifteen-year-olds Lisa Gherardini and Giuliano de' Medici are secretly in love. When the ruling de' Medici family, which had reigned over Florence for generations, is ousted and forced to flee the city-state, Lisa intends to accompany Giuliano. However, an unknown figure thwarts their plans and brings her back home unrecognised. The golden feather that Giuliano had given her as a pledge of his unwavering loyalty is lost in the process. Confronted by her angry father, Lisa must choose between entering a convent or marrying the wealthy silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo. With a heavy heart, she reluctantly chooses the latter, though she cannot forget Giuliano.

Leonardo and the Tyrant - Cannons in Place of Art

Leonardo da Vinci is a sought-after artist. Under Ludovico Sforza's patronage, he created two sensational portraits of women in Milan, which have brought him international fame. His mural "The Last Supper" is also regarded as a masterpiece.

He came to Milan to cast a gigantic bronze equestrian statue. The seven-meter clay model for it is already complete and draws art enthusiasts from all over the world. To cast it in bronze, Leonardo designed an impressive structure. However, his plans are thwarted when Ludovico Sforza redirects the 75 tons of bronze he had allocated for the project to the forging of cannons due to the looming threat of war from France. Leonardo is incensed by this.

Lisa and Francesco - Blossoming Love

In the meantime, significant political upheaval has occurred in Florence. Following the expulsion of the Medicis, the city is now dominated by the fundamentalist preacher Savonarola, who holds sway behind the democratically elected government. His followers tyrannise the city, destroying artworks and luxury items in a massive bonfire known as the "Bonfire of the Vanities" on the Piazza della Signoria. A power struggle between the Pope and Savonarola eventually leads to his downfall, and the once-admiring masses execute him cruelly.

During this tumultuous time, Lisa is heavily pregnant. Although she still yearns for her first love, she finds herself drawing closer to Francesco, who, despite his fiery temper, captures her heart. Her relationship with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who all live in the same house, is fraught due to her noble yet financially

strained background. After giving birth to a son, her status changes, and she gains respect from them all. She and Francesco grow closer than ever before.

Leonardo and Giuliano - The Plan

Venice 1499: As the French conquer Milan and oust Ludovico Sforza, Leonardo heads to Venice to meet the exiled Medici brothers, Giuliano and Piero. They propose a deal to him: they recommend Leonardo to the commander Cesare Borgia as a military engineer, a position Leonardo has long coveted. In return, he commits to painting a portrait of Lisa. However, the Medici brothers' intentions for Lisa go beyond a sentimental remembrance of Giuliano's first love. They hope that Lisa can discreetly provide useful information, identifying families in Florence who would support the Medici's return to power.

Leonardo agrees to paint the Mona Lisa if Piero manages to secure him a position as a military engineer with Cesare Borgia.

Lisa and Leonardo - First Encounter

Florence 1500: In the years of her marriage, Lisa has faced several painful experiences. She has given birth to three children, losing the one she loved most. Additionally, she has discovered that Francesco has been having an affair with the slave Caterina, who lives in their house, and has fathered a child with her. This revelation has dealt a blow to her budding love for Francesco. Seeking solace, she frequents the Santissima Annunziata church, where her deceased daughter is buried in the family crypt, yet she finds no peace.

It's here that she first encounters the renowned Leonardo da Vinci, who has returned to Florence to paint an altarpiece for the Servite monks.

Leonardo and the Butcher - The Trauma

As Leonardo sets up his workshop, an invitation from Cesare Borgia to join his service as an engineer reaches him. Enthusiastic, he abandons his work to prepare for this new venture. However, the reality of war is far harsher than he had imagined while designing his war machines, and the brutality of his new master plunges the sensitive Leonardo into a deep crisis. Witnessing Cesare Borgia kill his disloyal commanders, including a friend of Leonardo's, during a banquet, leaves him deeply traumatised. He seizes the first opportunity to part ways with Borgia, returning to Florence. Here, he must fulfil his promise and paint Lisa del Giocondo's portrait.

Lisa and Leonardo - The Portrait and Its Secret

Florence 1502: Following the death of Lisa's mother-in-law, a fierce dispute erupts over her inheritance. Francesco seizes the opportunity to distance his business

dealings from those of his brothers. He purchases a nearby house and transforms it into a magnificent palace. In the meantime, Lisa befriends the poet Ginevra de' Benci, a long-standing confidante of Leonardo da Vinci, who becomes a motherly friend to her.

Struggling to believe that Leonardo wants to paint her, given that he typically declines such commissions, Lisa is overjoyed to discover that the idea originates from Giuliano and that she can be useful to him. In a letter, Giuliano includes the matching part of the golden feather that Lisa had lost during their foiled escape.

Lisa devises a plan to help Giuliano by identifying families still sympathetic to the Medici cause. She establishes a Literary Women's Circle, ostensibly for reading and discussing poems, but in truth, she forms a secret network with her friends Ginevra de' Benci and Simonetta Tornabuoni, connecting young women from families who sympathise with the Medicis. This venture puts her in grave danger.

Still deeply traumatised by his friend's murder, Leonardo finds that the conversations with Lisa during their portrait sessions are therapeutic for him. Niccolò Macchiavelli, right-hand man to the government, raises his concerns, observing Leonardo and noticing Lisa.

Betrayal

Lisa is arrested by the secret state police and subjected to interrogation. She is accused of conspiring against the government with the aim of restoring power to the Medicis. When she denies everything, they threaten her with torture. In the nick of time, Macchiavelli takes over the case himself and releases her. As a shrewd diplomat, he aims to keep all options open, expressing interest in holding secret negotiations with the Medici brothers. Lisa, however, refuses to comply.

Francesco discovers the golden feather and realises that his wife is in contact with Giuliano de' Medici. He reveals that he was the one who foiled Lisa's escape, ensuring her safe return home. On that occasion, he found the matching part of the golden feather and has kept it ever since. Lisa accuses him of ruining her life and not understanding true love. Recently, Caterina, the slave, became pregnant by him again and almost died from a miscarriage. Lisa is uncertain whether she can forgive him for everything. Francesco embarks on an extended business trip to Lyon. Upon his return, they will decide whether to part ways.

Meeting with Giuliano

In order to gain clarity about her feelings, Lisa decides to personally deliver the names of the loyal supporters to Giuliano. She's willing to leave Francesco and her children behind, hoping to rekindle the old times with Giuliano. With the help of

Ginerva and Leonardo, she arranges a meeting at Leonardo's birthplace in Anchiano near Vinci – an extremely dangerous endeavour, as there's a substantial bounty on Giuliano's head.

Since her interrogation Lisa has been followed, but she disguises herself as a stable boy and manages to escape the city incognito.

The reunion with Giuliano is an emotional rollercoaster for Lisa. Initially, it seems that the passionate love of their youth still binds them, but then Lisa realises that she's merely a means to an end for Giuliano. The idealistic teenager has transformed into a formidable warlord and strategist. She, too, has changed over the past ten years. She recognises where her place truly lies – by her husband's side and with her children.

Leonardo and Michelangelo - The Rivalry

Leonardo receives an honourable commission from the city of Florence to create a massive mural for the new assembly hall in the 'Palazzo della Signoria'. The theme is a triumphant war scene, and Leonardo hopes that this project will exorcise his old demons from his time with Cesare Borgia. He chooses the encaustic technique, which uses wax-based paints. Unbeknownst to him, his greatest rival, Michelangelo Buonarroti, is tasked with creating the mural on the opposite wall. The entire city anticipates this artistic competition.

Together with his friend Tommaso, Leonardo tests the flying apparatus they have been developing for years. Upon returning to his work in the Palazzo della Signoria after a few days, he finds that Michelangelo's assistants have placed brasiers under his nearly completed mural, causing the wax-based paints to melt. His work is ruined. Though Leonardo believes Michelangelo sabotaged it, he himself is blamed for the failure.

Contemplating leaving Florence and accepting an invitation to Milan, Leonardo is determined to finish Mona Lisa's portrait first – not for Giuliano or Francesco, but for himself. However, he still believes the painting lacks the essence, what he calls the 'secret' of every individual.

Francesco's Return

Over a year has passed since Francesco's departure, and Lisa, having chosen to be with him wholeheartedly, eagerly awaits his return. Caterina, on the other hand, is relieved to have her master and tormentor out of the house.

Upon Francesco's return, he brings two foreign maids with him – Caterina's sisters – after buying their freedom from slavery. As a sign of his genuine commitment to

Lisa, he grants freedom to all three women. Lisa and Francesco decide to start anew.

Mona Lisa and Leonardo - The Smile

During the next session, Leonardo discerns from the way Mona Lisa smiles that she has found her place in life and has become aware of her true love. This missing piece was what the painting lacked. Now he can complete the masterpiece. Lisa is overwhelmed by the painting's radiance.

Leonardo arranges for the painting to be brought to Lisa's house and hung there. When Francesco unveils the painting, everyone is enthralled. Only Lisa is puzzled – because it's not the same painting she saw in Leonardo's workshop.

When Lisa attempts to question the painter, she finds him packing up. Leonardo is leaving Florence, and Lisa senses that it's a farewell for good. He informs her that he cannot part with the original of her portrait and will continue working on it until his last breath. The copy he gave Francesco was painted by one of his assistants in his workshop. Only Lisa's face and hands were painted by Leonardo himself. Lisa agrees to let him take the portrait with him. They'll never see each other again, but they'll remain forever connected through the painting.

Epilogue

Florence, in the spring of 1519: Mona Lisa is 39 years old and a mother of five children. She receives a letter from Amboise, France. It's a letter Leonardo has sent her from his deathbed, containing not only words but also a sketch sheet filled with attempts at capturing Mona Lisa's smiling mouth – one of the many sheets he created back then. The letter reads:

Your smile, Mona Lisa, has always accompanied me and comforted me in many dark hours. As I promised you, I continued to work on it all these years. For the past few weeks, my right arm has been paralysed, and I can no longer hold a brush, much to my dismay. But as long as it was possible, I brought this painting a little closer to perfection, and just as you aged gracefully at home in Florence, you also aged gently on the canvas here; that's how close you are to me in my thoughts. Although all who have seen the painting swear it was long finished for many years, I know that my modest art will never capture the magic of your soul, even if I were granted eternal life. Yet, I am mortal, like all humans, and death is by my bedside, ready to befriend me. So, now, as a keepsake of our time together and in gratitude for all you've done for me, I enclose this sketch sheet where I did my best to fathom the secret of your smile.
Yours, devoted beyond death.

Leonardo da Vinci

English Sample Translation

1

THE FLIGHT

Florence, 1494

The grey November sky weighed heavily over Florence. Fine rain sprayed Lisa's face as she hurried through the streets of the Santa Croce district. She pulled the hood of her coarse woollen coat down as low as possible on her forehead to avoid being recognised. The pungent stench of fresh animal hides and alum wafted from the tannery district on the banks of the Arno, while shouts and the clattering sound of clashing swords echoed from the maze of streets.

"Down with the Medici!"

"Palle! Palle!" others responded with their battle cry.

"To hell with you, Palle," someone yelled back. Then blades clashed nearby.

Lisa Gherardini started running and nearly slipped on the wet cobblestones. Her heart pounded in her chest. Unrest had hung in the air since Piero de' Medici had returned from his negotiations at the French king's camp near Sarzanello the day before. Lisa's father, Antonmaria Gherardini, who had listened to Piero's report in the Palazzo della Signoria as a member of the "Consiglio dei Cento," had come home furious. At the lunch table, he had spoken of betrayal within their ranks and expressed outrage at how recklessly the son and successor of Lorenzo, whom everyone called "the Magnificent," jeopardized the security of the republic.

"What a bungler," he raged. "He couldn't have done a worse job. He had missed the right moment to negotiate. And then he must have panicked at the last moment. Good Lord, imagine, he threw Pisa, Livorno, and Sarzana into the Frenchman's jaws! And 200,000 gold florins on top of it. Charles VIII won't spare Florence, not at all. What fools we were to entrust our fate to that brat!"

"He's still young," Lucrezia, Lisa's mother, gently objected.

"His father was even younger when he took power," Antonmaria angrily retorted. "But Lorenzo spoiled his sons. Festivals! Tournaments! Ball games! Bah!"

Lisa would have liked to argue. What her father said about Piero might be true. However, his youngest brother, Giuliano de' Medici, was cut from a completely different cloth. Giuliano was not only the most handsome young man in all of Florence but also intelligent and level-headed. And he had a good heart. "This clan has ruled over us long enough," her father had finally said. "It's time for us to remember our republican heritage."

And then, Betta, her nursemaid, had slipped her this note from Giuliano after dinner. We must flee, it said. Come to the garden gate as quickly as you can. I love you. Now she was on her way there. The gate of the house she had just hurried past swung open. Four men stormed out. Lisa quickly retreated into a gateway and let the lads pass by. They were all armed with cudgels and two of them held burning torches in their hands, even though it was still far from dark. As Lisa watched them, she saw that more menacing figures joined them at the next street corner. The mob headed in the same direction as Lisa, towards Via Larga, to the Medici Palace.

Lisa gathered her cloak and ran on. She felt the paper with Giuliano's message tucked into her bodice, where the delicate golden feather he had given her as a token of his love also rested. Yes, they loved each other, and Lisa hadn't hesitated for a moment. She had exchanged her shoes and cloak with Betta, hastily sewed the little jewellery she possessed into the hem of her underdress with the thread from her embroidery, and set off.

She briefly stopped behind the chancel of the Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral, gasping for breath. Horrified, she observed angry citizens streaming from all sides and going in the same direction.

"Beat them to death, the traitors!" she heard a shrill voice cry out.

"Hang them, the bastards!" demanded others.

A group of young men wearing the colours of the Medici roughly made their way through the crowd and began to beat the rebels. Lisa felt a hard shove in her back. "What are you doing standing in the way?" a woman snapped at her, giving her another push that made her stumble. Startled, Lisa grabbed her hood with both hands to keep it from slipping off. Then she ran with her head lowered, taking a slight detour through Borgo San Lorenzo Alley to avoid the crowds. Besides, she needed to approach the Medici Palace from the back. That's where the garden gate was, where her lover awaited her.

On Piazza San Lorenzo, it was quieter, and the noise of the fighting reached her only faintly. Lisa leaned against a house wall for a moment, trying to

calm her heartbeat. Since the summer, she and Giuliano had been a couple. Her cheeks grew warm at the thought of their embraces, his wonderful lips, the touch of his hands, his breath on her neck. He was only a few months older than her, fifteen years old, the youngest scion of the family that had governed the city-state of Florence for generations. Lisa couldn't believe that it would all come to an end on this terrible November day. She hurriedly set off again because, if it was truly necessary, she would accompany Giuliano, even if it meant going to the ends of the earth.

It would have been futile to ask her father for permission - although he hadn't been displeased at first when she and her girlfriends were invited to games and parties at the Medici's. Even though Antonmaria Gherardini still regarded the bankers as upstarts, which Lisa found questionable considering the Medici's centuries-old power and wealth, her own family lacked exactly that: influence and money. But now the tables had turned, and it was unlikely that her father would allow her to become Giuliano's wife.

She hurriedly crossed Piazza di San Lorenzo and peered along Via de' Gori. Shouts and noise came from Via Larga, where the main entrance to the Palazzo was located, as if the rebels were trying to storm the mighty gates. She darted into Via de' Ginori towards the rear garden gate. Suddenly, she heard the sound of approaching horses and quickened her pace even more. Two grooms raced by, each leading a noble steed. The iron-clad hooves struck sparks from the cobblestones, and Lisa had to be careful not to get hit by them. In the process, she didn't notice her hood slipping off her head.

"Get back!" one of the grooms shouted at her, raising his riding crop.

Then the garden gate flew open.

"Lisa!" Giuliano called out and pulled her into his arms.

"What are you doing?" Piero shouted from behind him. "There is no time for romantic farewells, brother. Let's go. Into the saddles."

"She's coming with us," Giuliano firmly replied. "We need another horse."

"Sir, that's impossible..." The rest of the groom's objection was swallowed by the noise of approaching rebels. It was only a matter of time before the angry mob reached them.

"No more long speeches," Lisa heard a calm voice say. "Get out of the city!"

A young monk stood in the garden door. Only upon closer inspection did Lisa recognize Giovanni, the middle of the three Medici brothers, who, at barely nineteen years old, was already a cardinal. But why was he wearing a monk's habit now?

"I'll take her on my horse," Giuliano insisted, grabbing her hand.

"You will not," Piero shouted, already mounted on his horse, which nervously pranced in the narrow street, and looked around in panic.

"We're not burdening ourselves with a woman. That's an order!"

Horrified, Lisa saw that the end of Via de' Ginori was blocked by the rebels. A tall figure broke away from the group and ran toward them. With an elegant motion, Giuliano mounted his horse and leaned down to lift Lisa up to him, while Piero galloped out of the alley.

Lisa reached for his hand, felt its firm grip, and jumped. She had already lost contact with the ground when another force pulled her back down, so forcefully that she slipped from Giuliano's hand. Angry, she screamed, but before she could defend herself, a cloth was placed over her head and upper body, then tightly fastened around her torso. She struggled in vain, feeling herself lifted up; her thighs were grabbed, and she was thrown over a shoulder.

"Let me go!" she screamed, but only a croak came out of her throat. The thick fabric was wound so tightly around her head that she could hardly breathe. Her arms were tightly bound to her body, like a swaddled infant. Whoever had seized her held her legs tightly and hurried away with her.

I'm being abducted, she thought. In mortal fear, she summoned the last of her strength, trying to kick her captor and wriggle free. In vain. She couldn't breathe. And suddenly, there was a high whirring in her ears, filling her head, condensing into a bright, buzzing sound. Then everything turned black around her.

When she awoke, she thought she was dreaming. Or had everything else been just a dream? She was lying on a padded bench, looking up at the ceiling. Dark beams with familiar painted rosettes in between.

"I think she's waking up." That was Betta's voice.

Lisa sat up abruptly. She looked around in disbelief and met her mother's startled eyes.

"Child, what have you got yourself into!" Lucrezia Gherardini sounded deeply concerned.

Lisa sat up. She wanted to say something, but her throat felt like she had swallowed a ball of yarn. Betta handed her a glass, and Lisa drank with cautious, small sips. Her head was throbbing. She had no idea what all of this meant.

The memories slowly returned: Giuliano high up on his horse and their intertwined hands. The moment he had pulled her up to him. And then that opposing force. The jerk that had torn her away from her beloved. And carried her away...

The door flew open, and her father entered.

"What were you doing in Via de' Ginori?" His voice echoed through Lisa's throbbing head. She closed her eyes, pressing her hands against her temples. "Speak to me!" Antonmaria grabbed her wrists and forced her to look at him. His grip was tight; it hurt her. "What were you planning?" His face was only a few inches away from hers. And as Lisa lowered her gaze and gave no answer, he added softly and threateningly, "Did you really intend to run away with those lads and disgrace yourself? Answer!"

"Antonmaria," Lucrezia gently admonished. "I beg you!"

"I want an answer," her husband demanded, releasing Lisa's wrists. He was not a violent person. He had never hit his daughter. But Lisa understood that she had crossed a line. And beyond that line, new rules applied.

"Why were you there? Tell us," her mother pleaded, anxiously keeping an eye on her husband. Behind her, Lisa spotted her nurse's pale face. Good old Betta had closed her eyes and moved her lips as if in silent prayer.

"I want to follow him into exile," Lisa whispered and coughed. She straightened up. "We love each other."

Her father stared at her, then started laughing. "You love each other? Whom are you talking about?" he asked menacingly. "Surely not that failure Piero?"

Lisa hid her face in her hands. Nothing would make her speak against the young man she loved.

"A message has been found," she heard her mother say. "A little letter. Here it is."

Horried, Lisa removed her hands from her face and saw her mother passing Giuliano's message to him. He read the lines, pressed his lips together, and shook his head.

"I thought you were smarter than that," he said, looking at Lisa disdainfully. "How fortunate that this foolishness was thwarted. You will not follow anyone into exile, Lisa. If what I've heard is true, the brothers are already dead anyway." He stood up and picked up the cloak that lay on the floor in front of the bench. Betta's cloak.

"Does this belong to my daughter?" He looked at Lucrezia with accusatory eyes.

"No," she answered. Her gaze darted to Betta, then immediately turned away. But Antonmaria had seen it, nonetheless.

"So, my daughter had an accomplice," he said, walking up to Betta.

"Here." He handed her the old cloak. The nurse took it and lowered her head.

"Pack your things and leave. My wife will pay you your wages. You have an hour and then I want you gone."

"Papa," Lisa pleaded desperately. "It's not her fault."

"You're right," her father replied vehemently. "It's your fault. And I hope you understand what you've done." Betta sobbed and left the room, while Antonmaria loudly pulled a chair closer, sat down, and stared at his daughter as if interrogating her.

"There's only one thing I want to know from you: How far did you go with this Giuliano de' Medici?" He almost spat out the name. "Did he dishonour you? Yes or no?"

Lisa pressed her lips together and turned away. Desperation welled up within her. She thought of the tender hours she had spent with her lover, there in the garden among laurel bushes and ancient statues from Rome and Greece. She thought of his touches, which had ignited a fire within her, a fire she had only vaguely sensed sleeping inside her. The indescribable sweetness of his kisses and the waves of passion in which they merged, were so natural and inevitable because fate had destined them for each other and...

"Your silence tells me everything." Her father stood up. "If he wasn't already dead," he said through clenched teeth, "I would gladly take care of that." "Let me talk to her," Lucrezia pleaded softly. "Alone. It's a matter for women," she added.

Antonmaria Gherardini laughed bitterly. "A matter for women," he repeated contemptuously. "Yes, talk to her. You should have done that long ago."

Then he left the room with heavy steps. The door slammed shut behind him. Lisa burst into tears. Not because her father was so angry with her, but because she couldn't bear the thought of Giuliano being dead. "Tell me what happened. From the beginning."

Lisa had changed clothes under her mother's watchful gaze. Her dress had been greatly damaged, the hem was dirty and partially torn, and some decorative ribbons on the sleeves had come off. She had tried in vain to hide her underdress with its sewn-in pieces of jewellery, but Lucrezia had discovered everything. Unlike her father, Lisa's mother was the epitome of patience, and that was necessary with seven children ranging in age from four to fifteen. Alessandra, the youngest, now stood at the threshold, holding her doll in her arms, and looked at her oldest sister with wide eyes.

"Why is Lisa crying?" she asked anxiously. "And why is Papa so angry?"

"Leave us alone, Sandra. Go and play with the other girls." Lucrezia firmly ushered the little one out of the room. "And now I want to know what happened."

Lisa saw her mother's reflection in the mirror behind her as she removed the pins from her dishevelled hair and picked up a hairbrush.

"Who was it?" Lisa asked in return.

"Who do you mean?"

"Who brought me back home?" Desperately, she worked on her long, dark brown, shining hair with the brush, hurting herself in the process. But that was still less painful than being separated from her beloved.

"That doesn't matter," Lucrezia replied. "What's important is that no-one else recognised you."

"Whoever it was, they had no right..."

"Listen," her mother interrupted her, now agitated. "This is not the moment to ask such questions. Apparently, you haven't grasped how serious your situation is. Your father is determined to place you in the care of his sister."

"His sister? Do you mean Aunt Ginevra?" After Aunt Lucia died, her father only had this one sister left. And she lived in the convent under the name of Suor Albiera. "What are you saying?" she asked, alarmed.

Instead of answering, Lucrezia paced the room, agitated.

"How could you act so thoughtlessly?" she scolded. "We had hoped to find a good man for you. You know as well as I do that it wouldn't have been easy given our financial circumstances."

"Giuliano would have been a brilliant match..."

"Stop!" Lucrezia cut her off forcefully. "Where has your common sense gone? The era of the Medici is over, you need to finally realize that. And that's not all. Anyone associated with them is in mortal danger. Can't you hear what's happening out there?" Lucrezia flung open the heavy curtains and opened one of the windows. The noise that filled the room was indescribable. "There's a civil war going on. The mob has plundered the palace on Via Larga. I wouldn't be surprised if they reduced it to rubble. The servants who didn't flee were beaten or hanged. And now the different factions are fighting each other." She closed the window and carefully drew the curtains shut again. Worried, she turned to her daughter. "If anyone saw you with the Medici brothers, we are all doomed," she said softly. "All of us, not just you. Now, finally, tell me what happened between you. Did you give yourself to him?"

Lisa turned away defiantly. And yet what her mother had said frightened her. Perhaps it was best if she remained silent. Lucrezia sighed, brought a chair over, and took the brush from her daughter's hand. "Listen carefully," she said. "Your father will call the family physician to examine you. Do you want that? Or would you rather confide in me?"

Telling her mother the truth hadn't helped. Lucrezia Gherardini had turned as pale as wax after extracting from her daughter that she had slept with Giuliano not just once, but a total of five times. Then she had left Lisa alone. Finally.

As soon as her mother had gone, Lisa feverishly considered what to do with the letters Giuliano had written to her. She had to hurry - after all, she shared the room with her younger sisters, eight-year-old Ginevra, nearly six-year-old Camilla, and Sandra, the youngest. The Gherardini family lived in a rented apartment, and it was extremely cramped. If it hadn't been for Lucrezia's father, Galeotto del Caccia, taking care of things, they wouldn't even have secured this apartment in a half-decent palazzo. They would still be living in that dark hole near the wool-dyers' district beyond the Arno, where rats could cross your path at any time in the narrow alley, and the stench on hot summer days was unbearable. They had moved here just half a year ago, right next to their grandparents, and although the landlord who lived beneath them complained daily about the noise of the children, it was much nicer here than on the other side of the river.

Lisa opened her trunk and felt for Giuliano's letters. They must not fall into her parents' hands. All those intimate confessions, the tender love vows. She pressed the bundle to her lips. What should she do with them? And with the love poems she had written for him? Burn them? The thought brought tears to her eyes again. But she couldn't think of another solution; it was quite possible that her father would order a search of her belongings. Determined, she went to the fireplace and threw everything into the flames. She turned away so as not to witness Giuliano's words turning to ashes. She still had the golden feather, after all.

Her hands instinctively moved to her bodice, where she had been keeping the precious item for weeks. But it wasn't there. A hot shock ran through her. Hastily, she opened the top of her gamurra, her house dress, and pulled it over her head, turning and examining it. The golden feather was gone! Apparently, when she was abducted by the unknown person, she had also lost Giuliano's token of love.

As if her mind only now grasped what had happened, she sank onto the bed and wept bitter tears. "Giuliano," she whimpered desperately. "Where are you?" Was what her father had said true? Had he been killed? No, she couldn't believe it.

Finally, her tears dried up. She wiped her face and got dressed again. Then she decided to speak to her father. Antonmaria and she had always understood each other well. When he went to the family estates, he often took her along, treating her like an adult, explaining the lease agreements and discussing the income he derived from them. She could understand that he was angry with her

at the moment. Eventually, he would calm down, and then they could talk rationally about everything. Just like before.

When she tried to leave the room, she found the door locked. At first, she couldn't believe it, she rattled the handle, but it wouldn't give way. In a panic, she pounded her fists against the wood until her hands hurt.

"Let me out," she screamed, then listened. Was that whispering and murmuring on the other side of the door?

"Papa said you're not allowed to go out." That was Franceschino's voice, and it sounded quite wise for a nine-year-old. "So you won't run away again."

Towards evening, her mother came and ordered her to pack her trunk.

"Where are you sending me?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"For now, to Betta's chamber." Lucrezia avoided looking into her eyes, and Lisa understood how much all of this affected her. It must be weighing heavily on her that her daughter hadn't confided in her. But what else could Lisa have done? She had known from the beginning that her mother would never approve of her love for Giuliano.

Folco appeared and lugged the trunk to the attic. The servant cursed, as the bulky thing barely fitted up the narrow staircase. Then Lisa was escorted there by her mother, past her six siblings who stared at her with wide eyes.

"Where is Lisa going?" she heard Camilla whisper.

"She wasn't well-behaved," Gigi, the oldest of the three brothers, replied. "She has to pay for it."

"But that's where Betta lives," seven-year-old Noldo interjected.

"Not anymore," Franceschino knew. "Papa sent her away."

At this news, Camilla and Alessandra burst into tears, and Lisa felt like crying too. Betta had been the soul of the house, taking care of the children and everything else - the laundry, cleaning, cooking. It wasn't just Lisa who would miss her. Her loss would hit the mistress of the house the hardest.

"You'll stay here for now," Lucrezia said when they reached the top, looking around the tiny room with concern. "Until your father makes up his mind."

"Mother," Lisa pleaded softly. "Let me talk to him."

Lucrezia sadly shook her head. "I've suggested it to him several times already. He refuses." Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself. "Folco will bring a heated stone for the bed. Lie down, Lisa. And pray. That's the only thing you can do now."

"Have you heard anything about Giuliano and Piero?" Lisa asked hastily as her mother was already turning to leave. Lucrezia shook her head, placed the candle on the tiny table, and left her alone.

Now she was a prisoner in her own house. Lisa looked around helplessly. The room under the sloping roof was so small that the trunk barely fit behind the door. There was no window here, only a small roof hatch, about the size of a book, sealed with waxed paper. She couldn't even see the sky anymore, but the relentless November cold seeped in.

So this was where the woman to whom she owed so much had lived. The woman with whom she had shared all her secrets. Lisa felt ashamed when she realized that she hadn't visited Betta once since they had moved in here. The bed consisted of roughly assembled planks and, even though it was covered with fresh sheets, it looked shabby and uncomfortable. The walls had been painted with yellow paint from Siena long ago, but many areas were now chipped and scratched. Above the headboard, Lisa thought she could see the imprint of a small cross, perhaps from that crucifix that her nursemaid had carried with her throughout her life, as Lisa remembered from her early years.

Despondently, she sat down on the straw mattress. She had not only destroyed her own life but also that of her beloved nursemaid. What was Betta doing right now? Where had she sought refuge after being suddenly expelled from the house? Betta came from a village in the area, she had never been married, and her child, whose father was unknown, had only survived for a day – that was all Lisa knew about her. Regret overwhelmed Lisa. How could she have drawn the kind-hearted soul into her dangerous venture? She had been thoughtless, not considering the consequences.

Heavy footsteps thundered up the stairs. Lisa jumped off the bed, pushed her hair out of her face, and modestly placed a shawl over her head. She half-hoped it was her father so that she could try to set things right, at least regarding Betta, even though she feared the encounter with him. But it was only Folco, who brought her the promised hot stone with a pair of tongs and carefully placed it in the iron casket at the foot of the bed. Then he turned around wordlessly and disappeared. The key turned loudly in the lock.

For a while, Lisa stood in the middle of the tiny room, trying to grasp that all of this was not just a dream. She checked if the door was really locked, took her nightgown out of the trunk, and prepared to sleep.

No washbasin with warm water, no dinner. No goodnight rituals with her sisters, no giggling and laughter. As she curled up alone in the uncomfortable bed, she longed for the warmth of the little ones who used to snuggle up to her in the big bed in the girls' room. So, this was where Betta had slept, she told herself over and over again, and her chest tightened with pain when she thought of the kind woman. Then she kicked something soft and woollen with her feet. It was

her mother's favourite shawl! Lisa's eyes filled with tears. So, Lucrezia hadn't completely forgotten her.

She jumped out of bed once more, wrapped the woollen shawl around her body, lay down again, and pulled the blanket over herself. And with the comforting thought that her mother didn't want her to be cold, she fell asleep despite all her worries and fears.

When she woke up the next morning, she didn't know where she was. The pale rectangle on the ceiling shimmered faintly. It was so cold that her breath formed small clouds.

Quickly, she closed her eyes again and tried to return to the dream in which she had just been so happy. She had been lying in Giuliano's arms, the wind rustling through the laurel bushes above them, the fountain splashing... But images from her dream faded, and another sound pushed itself into her consciousness. It was rain pouring over the roof and drumming against the waxed paper that sealed the roof hatch.

She stared up at the bright spot on the wall left by Betta's cross. Her mother had recommended that she pray. She attempted an Ave Maria but wasn't focused. When she reached the verse, "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb," she saw again her mother's horrified face, as she had confessed to giving herself to Giuliano. "Didn't you think about the consequences?" Lucrezia had lashed out at her. "What if you're pregnant?"

Of course, she had thought about it; she wasn't a child any more. It didn't scare her because Giuliano had talked about marriage, about wanting to start a family with her. He had said that he longed for a completely normal life, beyond all diplomacy and politics. A life with her. He had meant it, or else he wouldn't have asked her to come with him, wouldn't have reached out his hand to pull her onto his horse...

Lisa gave up praying altogether and pushed the blanket aside. Shivering, she searched the trunk for her warmest winter dress and quickly got dressed. However, she still felt frozen to the core. She checked the stone in the heater box; it was no longer warm. What time could it be?

Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten anything since the previous afternoon. Suddenly, she became terribly angry, jumped up, and pounded her fists against the door. How dare her parents keep her like a prisoner?

But her outburst died down, and nothing happened. Lisa wondered if they could even hear her downstairs in the apartment. Probably not. Resigned, she wrapped Lucrezia's woollen shawl around her shoulders and tried to calm down.

When her body started trembling from the cold, she crawled back into bed, still fully dressed.

She must have fallen asleep because suddenly her mother was standing in the room, looking down at her with concern. Lisa sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her head was pounding. "May I come downstairs?" She cleared her throat. It felt sore, and her limbs ached. Lucrezia sadly shook her head. She had brought a stool to the bed and placed a tray with a small meal on it. "You must be patient," she cautioned and handed Lisa the steaming cup. "Your father is still very angry. Here, drink." It was a herbal infusion. Lisa blew on the hot liquid, took several small sips, and bit into the cornbread that Lucrezia had prepared for her. "My throat hurts," she said, setting the bread aside and sinking back into the pillow. "You are not getting sick, I hope?" her mother asked in alarm, placing her hand on Lisa's forehead. Then she sighed deeply. "I suppose we'll have to call the family doctor after all."

For three days, Lisa burned with fever and longed for death. At first, she found it cruel to be left alone in the attic, even though her mother and the new maid checked on her almost every hour. Then again, she was glad to have her peace as, in a semi-conscious state, she travelled through memories of the time she had spent with Giuliano. She relived every tender moment, reconsidered every one of his words. "We have to be strong," he had once said, and she had nodded, but now she truly understood what he meant. They couldn't accept what had happened. And there was always hope. No, her beloved was not dead; he was alive, she could feel it clearly. At this very moment, he was thinking of her, she was certain of it. And once he had saved himself, he would spare no effort to fetch her.

That was the thought she clung to. He would send someone he trusted to free her from this attic room. In her imagination, she was already making the most adventurous escapes, and every sound of horse's hooves coming from the street filled her with hope.

However, as the fever subsided, so did the euphoria. Of course, he couldn't come personally; it would be far too dangerous. He would send someone, and that person would rescue her from this attic room. Such hopeful hours alternated with others of deep despair when she realized that the noise from below came from her siblings and not her rescuers. Or when she had to admit that there was no way to send her a message since Betta had been expelled from the house.

She pondered for a long time about the identity of the person who had abruptly torn her away from Giuliano there on Via de' Ginori, bringing her back

home as quickly as possible. She had asked her mother again, but Lucrezia had only shaken her head and pointed out that Lisa should thank God for this guardian angel who had saved her from the worst.

Finally, the fever receded, and her strength returned. She was allowed to go downstairs to the kitchen and take a bath in the zinc tub. Lucrezia sent the maid away and personally washed her daughter's long hair, lovingly combing it and helping her into her favourite dress. Lisa, exhausted from the effort after lying down for so long, watched as her mother expertly braided her hair.

"Your father wants to see you right away," Lucrezia said as she finished arranging the many small braids on the back of Lisa's head, securing them there according to the latest fashion. Apparently, she wanted her daughter to make a good impression. Perhaps her father had finally calmed down and would forgive her?

Lisa looked at herself in the mirror with concern. She was pale, with dark circles under her eyes, which seemed larger than ever. She rubbed her pale lips and pinched her cheeks to bring some colour to her face. "You are beautiful enough," she heard her mother say. "Maybe your father will have more pity on you when he sees how miserable you are." Lucrezia placed a dark veil over her daughter's head and checked if everything was in order. Lisa sensed that Lucrezia herself was worried, and she anxiously wondered what awaited her.

Antonmaria Gherardini sat in his study and initially didn't look up from the papers he was studying. Lucrezia closed the door softly, leaving Lisa alone with her father. He was reviewing accounts, probably from one of the family's leased properties that they used to go through together. And since they usually didn't meet expectations, Lisa could assume that her father was not in a good mood. Finally, he set the papers aside and looked up.

"Lisa," he began, "tomorrow you will leave us. I have spoken to the Mother Superior of San Domenico di Cafaggio, everything is arranged. Your aunt, Suor Albiera, will keep an eye on you and help you settle in. Not that you deserve it. But my sister, kind as she is, insists on it."

A rushing sound filled Lisa's ears. Her father actually wanted to send her to a convent?

"She doesn't know what you've done," he continued. "And no-one else should find out about it, do you hear? We will remain silent about this matter. And you will do the same. Anything else would harm us greatly."

"Father, I..." she began, but Antonmaria raised his hand, silencing her. "I can imagine that you are not happy about it. But no consideration can be given to that any more. You will submit to my will."

"I don't want to go to the convent! Please, you promised me." And when Lisa saw that it didn't seem to affect him, she added fiercely, "If you care so little about me, then let me follow Giuliano."

The fist slamming on the desk made her flinch.

"You must have gone mad," her father thundered. "Even if that bastard is still alive, don't you realize what would have awaited you by his side?"

"He loves me," Lisa retorted defiantly.

"I don't want to hear another word about this nonsense," her father yelled at her. "Yes, it may be that he is infatuated with you; after all, you are one of the most beautiful young women in Florence. Do you even realize how good your chances were of marrying into one of the best families, despite our financial situation? To be by the side of an honourable man who could have offered you a carefree life? But no, you had to chase after a delusion. Not a Medici in this world would have made you his lawful wife. Not even Giuliano. And do you know why?" He stared into Lisa's eyes, more agitated than she had ever seen him. "Because his brother Piero would never have allowed it."

"How do you know?" Lisa replied indignantly. "He swore to me..."

"...he would have broken his oath," Antonmaria interrupted her. "Because for generations the Medici have married exclusively for strategic reasons. It is one of their means of preserving their power. Why did Piero marry an Orsini? Not because he loves her passionately, but because the Orsini family is one of the most influential in Rome and this strengthens his position with the Pope. He married his sister Maddalena to Francesco Cibo, and again it wasn't about love but about gaining powerful allies. For his youngest brother, he certainly has grand plans already. Do you think a Gherardini would be considered for him?" He laughed bitterly. "Never in a million years. So, be silent and obey. I don't want to hear another word from you." Antonmaria grabbed the table bell that Lisa and her siblings had sometimes played with in another life and rang it. Immediately, Lucrezia stood in the doorway, looking anxiously from her husband to her daughter. "Take her back to the chamber," Antonmaria said mercilessly.

"Can't she at least spend her last evening with the family...?"

"No," he interrupted his wife, getting up. "For me, she is already gone."

Lisa hadn't known that she had so many tears left. She cried half the night, deeply distraught and sorrowful. She didn't want to go to the convent; the gloomy walls of San Domenico di Cafaggio had instilled fear in her since she was a little girl whenever she had to visit her aunt there.

The danger of having to live life as a nun had always hung over Lisa and her sisters because despite owning numerous properties in the surrounding area,

their father was not wealthy enough to pay the exorbitant dowry that a family of rank would expect if a person wanted to marry his daughter to one of their sons. While convents also demanded a considerable sum from the parents of their novices, it was much lower than a dowry. However, a few years ago, Antonmaria had promised Lisa that he would spare her from this fate. That had been during one of their summer stays in the countryside, in Ca' di Pesa in Chianti, their most beautiful property by far. Back then, he had taught her how to ride and had been pleased with how brave and skilful she was, almost like a boy, he had said. After Lisa was born, Lucrezia had suffered two miscarriages, and they were not her first; she had already lost a child before Lisa. It was only four years later that the heir Giovangualberto, known as Gigi to everyone, was finally born, and yet Lisa remained her father's favourite.

That was probably over now. And yet Antonmaria Gherardini knew very well that Lisa should not be imprisoned. After all, he had seen her galloping freely like the wind over the hills of Chianti. And that was how he had taken away her fear of a life in the convent. How deeply must she have hurt him for him to break his word? Nevertheless, it was unfair.

At some point, she must have fallen asleep. It was still pitch dark when the new maid woke her up. She had brought her a bowl of hot water so she could wash herself. Shortly after, her mother appeared with a glass of warm milk and Lisa's coat over her arm.

"Don't I even get to say goodbye to the little ones?" Lisa asked pitifully.

"They're still sleeping," Lucrezia answered, turning away. Lisa saw tears in her eyes. "If only you had confided in me," she said with a trembling voice. "Now I can't help you any more."

It was a cold morning. Mist rose from the river, grey and chilling. Nevertheless, after the long days in the attic, Lisa eagerly breathed the fresh air into her lungs. She coughed and wrapped her scarf more tightly around her head.

Silently, they made their way. Folco walked ahead of the women, holding up the torch. Occasionally, he looked back at them. Had her father instructed him to take extra care? Was he worried that Lisa would try to run away again? But where could she go? A leaden helplessness had taken hold of her.

She glanced around timidly. Few people were up yet. A baker's boy passed them, carrying a basket full of paninis, trailing the enticing smell of freshly baked bread behind him. Startled, Lisa noticed that many of the familiar shops in her neighbourhood were boarded up, and remnants of roadblocks were stored in some alleys. She hesitated at the Palazzo del Podestà when she noticed the bodies still hanging on the facade as a deterrent. Apparently, some of the Medici

followers had been hanged at the windows of the upper floor. Instinctively, Lisa covered her mouth and nose with the woollen scarf.

"Don't look," Lucrezia said softly, putting her arm around her daughter's shoulders.

But Lisa had already discovered the huge portraits that had been made of Piero, Giovanni, and even Giuliano, grotesquely distorted, they loomed over the facades of Piazza della Signoria, as if mocking Lisa. From then on, she kept her gaze lowered to the pavement, trying to banish the twisted image of her beloved from her mind.

When they arrived at the convent gate, Lisa held her mother's sleeve back. "Please," she pleaded, "try to change his mind. I can't do this, I'm not like Aunt Ginevra."

"Her name is Suor Albiera." Tears ran down her mother's cheeks. She tightly embraced Lisa and held her close. "I will try," she whispered. "But don't get your hopes up too much."

What followed felt like a terrible dream to Lisa. The gate was opened and one of the Dominican sisters received her and brought her to the Mother Superior, where her aunt was already waiting for both of them. Everything dissolved into tears before Lisa's eyes; she could barely hear their words. Then it was time to say goodbye. Lucrezia kissed her on the forehead, turned away hastily, and left. Lisa could hear the echo of her footsteps for a long time, slowly fading away.

"Come," Suor Albiera said gently. "I'll show you the dormitory."

But all Lisa perceived was the sound of the gate closing.

2 THE HORSE

Milan, 1494

Leonardo observed the splendidly attired company. Silk and brocade shimmered competing with gold jewellery, and in the flowing movements of the couples dancing together, diamonds and other jewels sparkled here and there. The hosts themselves were dressed in most splendid costumes; Ludovico Sforza, known as Il Moro, and his wife, Duchess Beatrice d'Este, stood at the head of the grand hall alongside the Marchioness of Mantua.

The time had come. Leonardo gave a signal. Fanfares abruptly interrupted the music. Surprised, the guests paused in their graceful dance steps and raised their heads as the illumination dimmed, leaving only a few candles alight. The portal opened, and ethereal light shone in so brightly that the noble ladies sighed and some crossed themselves.

"As if the sun has risen," a pretty court lady whispered rapturously near Leonardo, much to his delight. "A miracle."

At that moment, a rider appeared in the backlight. At first, only a dark silhouette could be discerned. The rider paused briefly, then slowly guided his horse across the threshold. As if by instinct, the courtly company parted to form a passageway, making way for the marvellous apparition that was revealed its full splendour in the now rekindled lights. A murmur spread through the crowd. The effect was truly grandiose. Horse and rider were covered all over with gold leaf, along with hundreds of peacock feathers that Leonardo's assistants had cut from the birds' plumage and affixed as ornaments to the costume. However, the most spectacular thing was hidden in the rider's helmet. On it was a globe, crowned by a golden bird whose tail almost touched the horse's back. A group of fantastically masked acrobats followed the rider, performing somersaults and cartwheels, eventually forming a human pyramid.

"How did you manage that?" Baldassare Taccone, the chancellor, asked, pointing at the rider.

Leonardo smiled and kept a watchful eye on the performance. "Oh," he calmly replied, "you wouldn't believe what a little gold, wax, and peacock feathers can achieve."

"But this light!" Taccone exclaimed enthusiastically. "How did you accomplish that?"

"One must still keep a few secrets, don't you think?" Leonardo amiably responded, excused himself with a bow, and hurried away. He wanted to make sure that everything was going according to plan on the makeshift stage above the hall, which had been draped with curtains. He didn't need to reveal to everyone that he was working with a reflector he had designed himself, combining several mirrors to focus the light from a single, large torch precisely onto the performer.

When Leonardo climbed up the scaffold to the papier-mâché cloud he had made, Salai had already taken up his place. Beautiful as an angel, Leonardo's apprentice knelt in the open half of the golden egg, fluffy white wings pressed against his body, his head tilted forward, adorned with an intricately crafted bird mask.

"Drive them insane," whispered Leonardo, well aware that the fourteen-year-old couldn't hear him—the trumpet fanfares were far too loud.

The dazzling rider had reached the centre of the hall and brought his horse to a halt. He took the reins in his left hand and made a sweeping gesture with his right towards the host and his young wife. And then it happened: a rain of golden lights sprayed from the rider's glove, enveloping not only him but also his entourage in a veil of glittering stars.

"Almost time," Leonardo murmured to the men operating the ropes. "On my signal. Salai! Close the egg!"

The boy stuck his tongue out at him from beneath the half-mask and pulled the upper half of the egg over himself. Harp chords resounded, mingling with the applause of the revellers and echoing off the walls. Amidst these sounds, the bird on the rider's helmet rose, stretched its neck, and to the astonishment of the spectators, turned blood-red. No-one could know that this effect was due to coloured glass plates that had been slid in front of Leonardo's optical devices. And now, the bird ascended even higher, unfurling its glowing wings—and suddenly, flames burst from its beak.

"Go!" Leonardo called out to the men operating the pulleys. "Let Salai fly!" Feathers rose from the burning bird. Some ladies were on the verge of panic, but the fire quickly died down, and other guests tried to soothe them. All theatre. All illusion.

Hardly had everyone calmed down a little when cries of surprise rang out once again. From the painted ceiling of the hall, a cloud descended, carrying a golden egg that then opened up. An otherworldly creature emerged; part fledgling, part angel, unmistakably a beautiful boy.

Leonardo twirled his golden-blond beard with excitement, where a few silver threads had recently appeared. They were not the first sign that he was growing older. Leonardo da Vinci was well aware of time and his own mortality. Nonetheless, he descended the hidden ladder as if he were not forty-two years old but as young as Salai and watched as the cloud continued to descend, finally hovering a few cubits above the ground. Fortunately, at the beginning of the spectacle, Ludovico Sforza had remembered what Leonardo had impressed upon him, namely, to join his wife at the marble star in the centre of the hall. This allowed Salai to effortlessly crown him with the gilded laurel wreath and place the precious diadem, which had cost the ruler a small fortune, in the princess's hair.

So far, so good. Leonardo hurried back to the rigging loft, giving instructions to gracefully retrieve the cloud. While the phoenix, risen from the ashes, showered genuine gold coins over the revellers, six men operated winches to pull it back onto the scaffold. Undoubtedly Leonardo's young assistant had stuffed his own pockets with gold beforehand.

"That was..." The Marchioness of Mantua visibly struggled for words, seemingly enthralled. And this was remarkable because the young, resolute ruler skilfully and firmly governed the small duchy in her husband's absence, as he served as a military commander in the service of the Republic of Venice.

"If my little interlude pleased, I am a happy man," Leonardo humbly interjected, bowing deeply.

"Leonardo da Vinci, you are an extraordinary impresario," the Marchioness continued. "And yet, I believe your talents are wasted on this type of diversion." Leonardo, sensing Isabella d'Este's intention, bowed once again and contemplated the best way to escape her.

"For your true calling lies in painting, am I right?" Duchess Beatrice, her sister, agreed, having just joined them. "Even though the spectacle was enchanting. So impressive. My heart skipped a beat when the bird burst into flames."

"Wasn't it dangerous?" a nobleman from the Marchioness of Mantua's entourage inquired in an accusatory tone.

"Oh no," Leonardo reassured him. "The rider's suit and the horse's trappings were soaked in a non-flammable substance. And as for the hall, fire hoses were prepared at all side doors."

"But all those sparks?" Apparently, this guest had been more afraid than the women.

"There were no sparks," Leonardo kindly explained. "Everything you mistook for sparks was dramatically staged golden confetti."

"You should paint a portrait of me." The Marchioness had finally managed to present her request. Leonardo put on a noncommittal smile to avoid appearing rude. Isabella d'Este challenged him with her gaze, her sky-blue eyes sparkling. "Wouldn't that be a more enticing task than portraying these..." she glanced briefly at her sister, the hostess, "... these concubines of certain rulers?"

Suddenly, it grew very quiet around them. Beatrice turned pale, and Leonardo felt sincere sympathy for the young woman. Not yet twenty, she had already given birth to a son for the Duke and was pregnant again. She had been sixteen when she was married off to Ludovico, who could easily have been her father. A strategic marriage, as often was the case. And yes, a few years ago, Leonardo had painted the stunning and equally young Cecilia Gallerani, with whom Il Moro had been infatuated, and the painting was as unconventional as it was perfect, causing a stir throughout Italy. It was called "The Lady with an Ermine."

"Well, dear sister," interjected Beatrice, who had apparently regained her composure. After her marriage, she had personally ensured that Cecilia had to leave the palace. "I doubt very much you would want to be depicted with a rodent."

"The ermine is not just any animal," Leonardo couldn't help but interject. "It is clever and courageous, and its motto is 'Rather die than be defiled.'" Moreover, Ludovico had been awarded the Order of the Ermine that same year, so the beautiful creature, whose white fur none of these noble ladies considered too precious to wear, was a symbol of the Duke. But why did he get embroiled in discussions?

"No, I have a grand commission in mind," Isabella d'Este explained. "An official court portrait, not a mere pastime."

Leonardo caught his breath. Mere pastime? Had he heard correctly? No, he would definitely never paint this woman. Other artists could paint official court portraits, labouring over the etiquette and courtly traditions when depicting the Marchioness. What Leonardo had truly enjoyed during his work on Cecilia's painting was the freedom to portray the Duke's lover as his intuition dictated, creating something never seen before. Everything about that painting was new: the pose, the surprising turn of the head, the gaze that was directed neither towards the viewer nor, as was customary in traditional wedding portraits, into the distance in strict profile. The Lady with an Ermine fixed her gentle, brown eyes

on someone who seemed to stand to the right of the viewer, almost over her shoulder, as if she had been called, and naturally, the creature on her arm followed that gaze. Those who didn't understand what he had accomplished, how deeply he had looked into the girl's soul - with such people, he should not engage in discussion. And he certainly wouldn't paint such a person. Never. Not for any amount of money in the world.

"You surely wouldn't want to poach our wonderful arbiter elegantiae, esteemed sister-in-law?" The Duke had approached them, and Leonardo chuckled as he heard him speak like that. He had called Leonardo the judge in matters of good taste - he didn't sound at all like the offspring of a condottiere, the leader of a mercenary army, which Ludovico's father had been before he expelled the Visconti and seized the Duchy of Milan for himself. Only recently, after the last heir of the Visconti had died under mysterious circumstances at the age of twenty-four, Ludovico had officially assumed the title of Duke, with the help of Charles VIII, the King of France, whom he had called into the country, and whose army was now marching into Rome after subduing Tuscany and eventually Florence. Would Ludovico be able to secure long-term control over Milan? Or would Charles, on his return, take control of this duchy as well, despite all the treaties that might not be worth the paper they were written on? It was by no means unlikely, and Ludovico was playing with fire.

"Oh no, my brother-in-law," Isabella d'Este retorted with a laugh. "I certainly do not need advice on good taste. However, I do desire a portrait by the master's hand."

Ludovico scrutinized Leonardo with his small, black eyes and furrowed his brow. "He is busy," he said coldly. "We have great plans for our dear Leonardo. A wall in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie awaits his decoration. Has he even started on it yet? And while we're on the subject - doesn't he owe me a painting of the Virgin Mary?" The Duke spoke reproachfully, as if it were a pair of new boots that the cobbler still hadn't made. "I wanted to have sent it to the King of Hungary long ago."

Leonardo, who hadn't even started the painting of the Virgin and had no intention of doing so, as it was highly questionable whether he would be paid for it, made an elegant bow. "Certainly," he said gently. "Everything in its own time. First, we will finally cast the equestrian statue in bronze that Your Highness has been waiting for so long." After all, the clay model had been finished for over a year. It stood in the castle courtyard and had become one of the biggest attractions in Milan, towering over seven meters in height. Turning to Isabella d'Este, he added, "Have you seen the model?"

She had not, and Leonardo willingly agreed to show it to her the following morning. (...)

Later, Leonardo entered the workshops to find that all hell had broken loose. Salai had stolen a wallet from one of the stagehands the previous evening, and now the infuriated man stood in the studio, demanding its return, seething with anger. Boltraffio, one of Leonardo's assistants, was wrestling with the boy, who was resisting with a great commotion.

"Hand over the wallet!" Leonardo said calmly. Boltraffio let go of Salai, shaking his head at this - in his opinion - hopeless case, and returned to his work. The little troublemaker put on a defiant expression. "Come on, now," Leonardo urged him. It wasn't the first time something had gone missing. Salai stole like a magpie. Gian Giacomo Caprotti, as he was called by his full name, had come to Leonardo when he was ten years old. His father, a local vineyard owner, had appeared at his door one day, telling of the boy's talent.

"He's no good for working in the vineyards," he openly admitted. "But he surprises everyone with his drawings. Please, take him on as an apprentice." Leonardo couldn't say no, as the pretty boy with mischievous eyes and blond curls reminded him too much of himself when he was a boy. He, too, had grown up in the countryside, the illegitimate son of a respected notary and a servant girl, and had been given to a painter as an apprentice at an early age. As for Gian Giacomo's talent, the father hadn't exaggerated; he was truly gifted and learned quickly. That his son was a notorious thief, the man wisely kept to himself. After his student played all sorts of pranks on the other painters in his workshop, Leonardo exclaimed one day, "You are a true Saladin," which was shortened to Salai thereafter. But a flutter of those beautiful boyish eyelashes was enough to melt Leonardo's anger. What could he do? He had decided to educate the little devil and train him to become a good painter. He had the potential for it; Leonardo was convinced of that. On his father's farm, he would only end up in ruin.

"I won't say it again," he threatened now. Salai made a face and threw the wallet at the feet of the aggrieved man. Then he turned on his heel and ran away.

"You had better count to see if anything is missing," Boltraffio grumbled to the stagehand, who quickly did so. Apparently, the amount was correct, as the man grumpily bade them farewell and went on his way.

"Always trouble with the rascal," remarked Marco d'Oggione, busy transferring Leonardo's design for a Madonna nursing the Christ Child onto canvas. "I wonder when you'll finally rid us of him."

Leonardo ignored the remark. Everyone knew, in any case, that he had taken a liking to Salai and would not send him away, no matter how much he annoyed them all. He made a playful comment about Fiametta, who was scurrying through the corridors of the old palace in the early morning hours, corrected some areas where Marco had exaggerated the lights and shadows in his preliminary drawing of the Madonna, and showed Girardo, who had only recently joined him, how to dissolve resins in repeatedly boiled turpentine for the delicate glazes that Leonardo preferred over opaque colours. Then he left the workshop and hurried back to the foundry to coordinate with the master and ensure that there would be enough assistants on site and no further delays standing in the way of casting the horse. Together with Luca, he double-checked all the calculations one last time, for there was only one attempt at this. Either it would succeed, or Leonardo would become the laughing stock of all of Italy.

"It will succeed," Pacioli assured him.

And yet, late in the evening as Leonardo finally retired to his appartamento, as he called the rooms he had taken in the former ducal quarters, he thought that its success depended on so many details and he couldn't possibly control them all. There was the quality of the metal and its temperature during casting, not to mention the skill of the craftsmen.

Restlessly, he walked from his bedroom to the studiolo, as Lorenzo the Magnificent had called his study back then, where Leonardo had occasionally been invited to meetings of the scholars gathered around the Medici. Some old chairs from the Visconti era stood around his table, spartan wooden seats with leather upholstery that Leonardo had personally refurbished. A human skull, which he had purchased from a grave digger, rested on a side table, a row of fossilized shells and clearly recognizable fish from the mountains sat on another. This was one of the mysteries he believed he had solved, namely how these aquatic creatures had ended up there. The seas must have covered the entire land up to these heights in the distant past; he wouldn't be dissuaded from that, even if many laughed at this theory. But his pride lay in the wooden globe in the centre of the table, a replica of the device made by Donnus Nicolaus Germanus for Pope Sixtus IV.

He searched for the folder with the drafts and looked through them while one of the cats that lived in the palazzo jumped onto his lap and nestled against him, purring. How many years had this project been occupying him now? Twelve? No, fifteen. He could hardly believe it. He critically examined his early sketches, in which Ludovico's father had still been firmly seated on his magnificent horse. The scene had become increasingly dramatic, with the horse rearing up and moving more into the centre. Until the rider on his back had become nothing more than a

burden that it would shed in the next moment. Eventually, the figure was omitted, leaving only the horse with its dancing grace and vigorous movement. And in a few days, it would finally be brought forth from the mould in its complete perfection.

(...)

The next morning, Leonardo stood for a long time in front of the wall in the refectory of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, which he was supposed to paint. Later, in his studio, his drawing pen flew across the paper, creating lines and hatching. He called his assistants, instructing them to bring some ladders, and put a spool of thread, as well as a hammer and nails, in his pocket. Back in the refectory, he and his helpers determined the exact centre of the wall and drove a nail in there. Under the astonished gaze of the monks who had gathered, he first stretched a horizontal string at the height of the nail from one corner to the other, and then radiating from the nail at various angles, creating a symmetrical network of threads.

"What is this supposed to be?" asked the prior of the monastery after twelve strings had been stretched over the masonry from the centre.

"Perhaps the artist was overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit," suggested an enthusiastic novice and was immediately ordered back to his work by the prior.

Leonardo couldn't help but smile. "The young brother is not entirely wrong," he explained with a smirk. "This inspiration does indeed come from above."

"What?" the prior retorted sourly. "Doesn't that sound like blasphemy?"

Leonardo stroked his beard. "And what if I tell you that I will ensure that the Saviour himself will dine in the same room with you and your brothers from now on? What do you say then?"

The prior gave Leonardo a withering look, quickly crossed himself, and shooed the other monks out of the refectory before making his own exit. Leonardo's assistants were greatly amused until their master clapped his hands resolutely three times.

"Enough laughing," he called out. "Which one of you understood what this means?" The laughter ceased. Leonardo's apprentices looked perplexed at the star-shaped strings.

"Some of them look as if they extend the lines of the paintings on the side walls," Boltraffio said, pointing up to the two long sides of the refectory.

"That's not true," Girardo objected. "The patterns run parallel to the ceiling, so straight. The strings, on the other hand, draw a diagonal line to the nail in the middle."

"But if you stand here," Salai chimed in, "it looks as if the borders are also slanted. The painting deceives." He laughed, tossing his blond curls back.

"Salai is right," Leonardo praised the youngest of his students. "It's not what we know that counts, but what our eyes see." He pointed to the corners where the side walls met the surface where the Last Supper was to be created. "It's called perspective. With perspective, we grasp space. We just have to look closely, then everything becomes clear. And as for this wall here - soon it will no longer be a wall but will open up as an extension of the refectory. A stage on which Jesus sits at the table with his disciples and partakes in the Last Supper. The space in which he will utter the unfathomable."

"What is the unfathomable?" Salai asked, snuggling up close to him.

"The betrayal," Leonardo answered, firmly grasping the boy's hand as he carefully reached for the artist's purse. "Before the rooster crows three times, one of you will have betrayed me," he freely quoted from the Bible.

"Send the boy to hell already," Boltraffio angrily demanded.

"Why should I? Not even Jesus banished Judas from his company at the table," Leonardo replied, giving Salai a playful nudge. "But back to perspective. Who can guess what I will paint in the place where the nail is?"

And as he saw only questioning faces, he added, "Who is at the centre of this story?"

"Perhaps the bag of silver coins?" Salai suggested with a cheeky grin.

"Most certainly not," Leonardo sternly replied.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ," Giampietro said reverently.

Leonardo sighed with relief. "That's right," he said. "I was afraid no one would come up with it."

Along the strings, Leonardo carved distinct grooves into the plaster. With the additional lines, he drew with red chalk and soft charcoal, the space, which gradually opened up from the wall, took on shape and depth. Leonardo had a scaffold built, where the prior could often be found. With wide eyes, he watched as the surface seemed to transform into a three-dimensional space with ceiling beams tapering towards the back and the illusion that the side walls continued to an imaginary background. Only in the far distance did this drawn space appear to close, and three windows in the back wall would provide a view of a landscape under a southern blue sky.

"The catch is," Leonardo's friend Pacioli said when he visited him one early morning, "that the perspective deception cannot work from every viewer's standpoint."

"It doesn't have to," Leonardo replied, indicating to his friend the door through which the monks entered the refectory. "I have observed the monks.

When they come in, their gaze falls first on the wall painting. Once they are seated in front of their plates, the soup becomes more important to them. That's why this spot here, just past the threshold, is the most important. Check it yourself."

"You're right," Luca said, laughing appreciatively.

"Furthermore, I will use the light in such a way that it appears to be falling through the real windows into the painted space," Leonardo continued eagerly. "I see it all clearly in my mind. Only the faces still worry me."

"The faces?"

"I have already made many studies, but I'm still not entirely satisfied." He pulled Pacioli to one of the tables where his sketchbook lay. "And it's not just the faces that give me headaches. It's the expressions, the gestures. Imagine someone you love more than anything else announcing that one of those present will betray him that very night. How would you react?"

The Franciscan scratched his head. "I probably wouldn't believe it at first," he said.

"What exactly wouldn't you believe?" Leonardo inquired. "The betrayal itself? Or that it would be someone from the group?"

He untied the ribbons of the sketchbook and opened it. Before his friend's eyes, he flipped through several sketches. "I'm considering grouping the disciples," he pointed to his helpers in the sketch. Three or four of them stood together, supporting each other. "That's simply what we humans tend to do. Four groups. Or will that be too symmetrical?"

"No, the entire space you invented is symmetrical," Luca interjected.

"Four groups, then," Leonardo repeated, and his cheeks began to flush with excitement. "Some can't believe it. Another group vehemently denies the accusation. 'Not me, my Lord,' they insist." He pulled out a sheet on which figures in various defensive postures were depicted. "Then there's the group that immediately consults with each other. 'A traitor? Who could it be?' And finally, the brave ones who are determined to defend their Lord and Master, no matter what may come." Leonardo pushed the sketches back together. "I want everything to be focused on that one moment, completely natural, as if we were there. But there's still a long way to go."

Luca carefully pulled at the corner of a drawing that peeked out from under the group sketches. A long table became visible, behind it, thirteen suggested figures.

"You want to place them all on one side of the table?" he asked. "How can that look natural? In reality, they would be spread around the table, and some of them should have their backs turned to us."

Leonardo smiled indulgently. "You've forgotten that they are part of the refectory. Part of the circle of monks. None of them turns their back on the others. I have already told the prior. He considers it blasphemy: Jesus and his disciples will partake in the Last Supper together with the monks. And they too may wonder: 'Have I betrayed my Lord?'" (...)

3

THE SILK MERCHANT

Florence, 1495 - 1496

The winter months had been long and cold, and spring was hesitantly announcing itself with a few sunny days. Lisa tightly gripped the handle of the rake, even though the fresh blisters on her hands were excruciatingly painful, as she worked the hard ground in one of the convent flowerbeds. "Everything becomes easy when you do it with joy," Aunt Ginevra said, placing a wicker basket on the path next to Lisa. "Remember that you're preparing a soft bed for turnips and beans. Here are the seeds, but the soil needs to be nicely loosened first." She watched her niece struggle for a while, then took the rake from her hand. "Watch closely. It's much easier this way." Her tool ploughed through the ground with a swift motion.

"Oh, Aunt Ginevra," sighed Lisa, but she was immediately reprimanded.

"Suor Albiera, that's how you should address me. Ginevra is dead since I became a bride of Christ. Just like Lisa will die once she has taken the vows of Saint Dominic..."

"You know I can't do that," Lisa interjected vehemently, tears welling up in her eyes. She looked up and gazed at the walls surrounding the garden. In the distance, other nuns were working. One of them was already sternly observing them. If she didn't get back to her work soon, she would receive a reprimand. One of many. "Patience," the older woman advised, handing back the rake. "Everything will fall into place with time. You'll become calmer. And more content. I pray for it every day."

"Pray instead that I get out of here," muttered Lisa, attempting to wield the rake as effortlessly as her aunt, while her tears dropped onto the still wintry soil.

Lisa wondered how she had any tears left. Every night she cried herself to sleep, and when the bell woke her up in the middle of the night to say the first prayers, the Lauds, according to the rules, her face was still wet. The strict daily routine, the endless kneeling in the convent church, followed by work in the

laundry, the spinning room, and the garden – she found it all torturous. She hadn't even been allowed to go home for Christmas. Just thinking about it made her tears flow. The package with her mother's pastries had only intensified her sorrow. She missed her family so much, especially her siblings. And, of course, her beloved Giuliano.

Sometimes news of the events outside the walls of San Domenico di Cafaggio reached her within the convent. She would listen breathlessly and learn that after the escape of the Medici brothers, something like a civil war had broken out in the city. For over three hundred years, this family had determined the fate of Florence. Piero's ancestors had brilliantly managed to reconcile the factions that had been feuding since time immemorial – some supporting the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, others the Holy See, while a third group supported an oligarchy of nobles. The expulsion of the Medici had created a power vacuum, and the bloody struggles for dominance had cost many citizens their lives. After weeks of general insecurity, a new so-called popular government had recently been formed, under the leadership of the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola from the mother convent of San Marco, news which the older nuns received with a sigh of relief. Merely mentioning his name made the devout women's eyes gleam and their cheeks turn rosy. In their opinion, he stood for law and order and finally put an end to the dissolute goings-on in Florence. He had managed to prevent the King of France from destroying and plundering Florence, a danger that Piero de' Medici's arrogant behaviour had brought upon them. It was solely thanks to Savonarola that the French had moved on towards Rome after just ten days. The Mother Superior seemed to consider Savonarola a saint, praising him extensively and reading the most important passages from his sermons, which resounded with threats and accusations, to the gathered sisters every Sunday. "Poverty! Chastity! Obedience!" These were the rules of the order, and Savonarola wanted to turn the whole world into a convent. Lisa couldn't share the enthusiasm of the Mother Superior; she felt a great aversion towards the preacher, who painted a dark picture of Christianity and condemned all beauty and even innocent pleasures with sharp words. And in her eyes, he bore some responsibility for the expulsion of her beloved. Savonarola had been one of the greatest adversaries of the Medici family, although Giuliano's father, Lorenzo, had brought him to Florence and promoted his career. "A big mistake," Piero had publicly commented at one of the dance events to which Lisa had been invited. "Zealous priests should stay where they belong – in their cells – and stay away from politics."

And now it was Lisa, of all people, who was stuck within convent walls. There had been only one day when she had been happy here, the day she had

learned that Giuliano and his brothers were still alive. Some said they were in Bologna; no, in Venice, others claimed. Or in Ferrara? The main thing was that they were safe, Lisa thought. And against all reason, she still hoped for a letter from her beloved. But how could he know where she was? Did he worry about her? Or had he long forgotten her amidst his own troubles?

"You are to come to Mother Superior," Aunt Ginevra's voice startled Lisa. She hadn't heard her return. "Immediately."

"What is it this time?" Lisa asked.

Suor Albiera shrugged. "Oh, child," she sighed, "I don't know."

Lisa hastily stored her rake in the shed and tried to shake off the dirt from her apron. At the well, she washed her hands and adjusted the cloth covering her hair.

With her head bowed, she entered the Mother Superior's cell and, as she had been taught, stopped just inside the threshold.

"You have a visitor," she heard the now feared voice say with an unusual gentleness. "Go out to the cloister."

A visitor? For a moment, Lisa was convinced that it had to be him, Giuliano. Then she corrected herself. That was impossible. There was a bounty on his head worth thousands of guilders. But a small, persistent voice inside her insisted as she curtsied deeply and composed herself as best she could before making her way to the cloister. He has disguised himself, that seductive voice of hope said. He has sent a messenger. He has...

Her mother was sitting on the stone bench near the rosebush, and Lisa struggled not to be disappointed.

"Lisa, my dear, how are you?" Lucrezia got up and opened her arms wide. Lisa fell into her embrace, sobbing. "That bad?" Lucrezia whispered near her ear. Lisa nodded, hiding her face in the familiar woollen shawl, breathing in deeply the scent of her childhood. "There, there, calm down," her mother continued. "I have news. Don't you want to hear it?"

Suddenly, Lisa became completely calm. Something had happened; she could feel it.

"I hope it's good news," she said, swallowing the last sobs.

"Most definitely!" Lucrezia replied with shining eyes, pulling her daughter towards the bench. "Come, sit with me. I have found a way to get you out of here. You're going to get married."

"Giuliano?" Lisa blurted out. Excitedly, she grabbed her mother's arm.

Her mother looked at her angrily. "Do you still have these childish fantasies in your head?" she scolded, glancing around to make sure no-one had heard them. "Of course not. He is in Venice and has a different lover every day of

the week. Wake up, my child. I had really hoped that the weeks here in the convent would bring some sense to you."

Once again, Lisa fought back tears. "But I won't marry anyone else," she stubbornly replied.

"Just let me finish speaking!" Lucrezia's eyes sparkled. "Haven't you understood that your father is determined to leave you here forever if you show even the slightest resistance? Can't you imagine how much persuasion it took for me to convince him of this way out? Have I been trying in vain? Do you prefer to become a nun?" Lucrezia stood up and looked down at her eldest daughter in anger. "Say yes, and I won't bother you again."

Desperately, Lisa reached for her hand. "Please," she pleaded. "I can't stay here."

"Then listen carefully to me." Lucrezia sat back down and took both of her daughter's hands in hers. "There is someone who wants to marry you. Despite your shame." Lisa dared not breathe. Whoever it might be, she didn't want him. "Don't you want to know who it is?" Lisa pressed her lips together. If it's not Giuliano, she wanted to reply, I'm not interested. The mere thought of belonging to any man but him filled her with horror. But she also didn't want to stay in the convent. Under any circumstances.

"Who is it?" she reluctantly asked, staring at her hands as her mother held them.

"Ser Francesco di Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo," her mother said proudly.

At first, Lisa didn't know who that was. Then she remembered. The del Giocondos were wealthy merchants, and a distant relative of hers had married into their family a few years ago.

"Isn't he the husband of Aunt Camilla? The one who died last summer?" Camilla had been the sister of her father's second wife; like his first wife, she had died in childbirth. Lisa had been allowed to attend Camilla's wedding. How old was she then? Eleven or twelve? She couldn't remember the groom for the life of her.

"That's him," her mother confirmed excitedly. "Ser Francesco is a businessman. He and his brothers trade precious fabrics worldwide. They also have their own silk weaving workshop. You couldn't wish for a better match!" Lucrezia smiled at her encouragingly. "Camilla left behind a little son," she continued. "Do you remember little Bartolomeo?"

"Of course, I remember Meo," Lisa muttered. She had taken care of the little boy a few times when Camilla had been ill.

"He's two years old now and needs a mother again," Lucrezia explained. "You've always been good with children. But the best part is, the del Giocondos

are one of the richest families in Florence. What unexpected luck!" Lisa's mother glowed with enthusiasm. "Francesco seems completely infatuated with you. It was he who mentioned you to me at the church. 'I haven't seen your Lisa in a long time,' he said. And that's when I realized he was interested in you."

"He must be at least twice my age," Lisa objected.

"He is thirty. So what?" Lucrezia's eyes sparkled. "Your father is eleven years older than me. An older husband brings blessings to a woman, especially when he is as wealthy as Francesco. And so respected. He has held a seat in the Signoria Council several times, and you know that only the most important family heads are granted that honour."

"He doesn't even know me," Lisa desperately replied. Faced with the choice of staying in the convent or marrying a man she did not love, both options seemed equally dreadful to her.

"Don't deceive yourself," Lucrezia answered with a small, mischievous smile. "He knows everything about you. And imagine this – he doesn't mind." Lisa proudly turned her head away. She felt no shame in having given herself to Giuliano. She felt no remorse, on the contrary. If she had known how everything would end, she would have met him even more often. "You can count yourself lucky that your foolishness with that little Medici had no consequences," Lucrezia said softly. "Do you have any idea how I trembled for you during the first weeks afterwards? Even at Christmas, I still had no idea how things were going to go. So, from now on, you will be exempt from the convent's work; I have already discussed it with the Mother Superior. You will move to the visitor's quarters, and we will provide you with food. You need to gain weight and get rid of those dark circles under your eyes. Because - to be honest, you look terrible. You can't possibly present yourself to Ser Francesco like this."

"Why can't I go home?" Lisa's voice trembled. "That's where I'll recover the fastest."

"Your father doesn't want it," Lucrezia replied, pressing her lips together briefly. "You are to go directly from here to the notary's office of Ser Piero da Vinci on Via San Giuliano and then to the del Giocondo family house on Via della Stufa."

Suddenly, Lisa understood the difficult battle her mother must have fought for her. Nevertheless, she couldn't get used to the idea so quickly.

"I need time," she replied, but her mother impatiently tugged at her hands.

"Time?" Lucrezia snapped. "You don't have time. Do you want to know what your father said?" She didn't wait for Lisa's answer. In vain, Lisa tried to free herself from her mother's firm grip. "'Tell her,'" he said, 'but if she shows even the slightest resistance, forget it.' Your father is torn. Because the dowry demanded

for such a marriage, if we Gherardinis want to preserve any respect in Florence, will make us poor people. On the other hand, your entrance into the convent would only cost us a fraction of that amount. So, guess which one he would prefer."

"Why does Francesco del Giocondo want me of all people?" Lisa desperately wanted to know.

Her mother shrugged. "Honestly, we all wonder," she replied. "I have only one explanation: Heaven has heard my prayers and sent him to us."

(...)

On the 5th of March, the weather was changeable. The sun intermittently cast golden reflections in the cool spring rain. A sedan chair arrived at the convent to pick up Lisa. At the office of the notary, Ser Piero da Vinci on Via San Giuliano, her future husband awaited her. Instead of the usual red gown that a bride would normally wear, Ser Francesco had sent her a simply tailored dress made of exquisite reddish-brown satin with black trims, which perfectly matched the color of her hair, and a black veil that was so feather-light and transparent that it covered her face less and, in a sophisticated way, made her features even more pronounced. She wore no jewellery apart from the golden cross that her grandmother, Piera del Caccia, had given her for her twelfth birthday. Three years had passed since then. And so much had happened.

Her heart pounded anxiously as she faced Francesco. She had to force herself not to stare at him. In the first moment, she only perceived a tall, sturdy figure in black mourning attire and pure white lace cuffs protruding from the sleeves, partially concealing his long sinewy fingers. Then, she dared to look at his face and met two grey-green eyes that observed her attentively. She registered the high, receding forehead and the strong cheekbones. The slightly oversized chin that detracted from the balance of his face. His hazel-brown hair was already thinning at the temples. No, she couldn't remember this face. She hadn't paid attention to him at the wedding almost five years ago. Men like him had not featured in her girlish dreams. His smile grew wider.

"Well?" he asked amused. "Do I pass your test?"

Lisa blushed under the veil. Behind Francesco, her father made himself noticed with a cough. It was the first time she had seen Antonmaria since that dreadful day in November when he banished her from his house. His gaze was threatening, and Lisa longed for her mother. But women were not involved in this type of business transaction.

The notary read out the marriage contract, and the words rushed past Lisa. Her heart, pounding with each heavy beat, seemed to tell her that she was

betraying her love, drowning out everything else. Papers were signed, and finally, it was her turn. She hesitated and received a hard pinch from her father. Eventually, she surrendered and placed her name on the document.

And then Francesco took care of everything else. Gently, he turned her towards him, placed a ring on her finger, lifted the veil, and lovingly kissed her on the lips.

"You won't regret it," he whispered so softly that only she could hear. "I promise you."

In contrast to the splendid wedding with Camilla, there was no celebration on this day, as it was not customary for the remarriage of a widower. Instead, Francesco invited his new in-laws to a meal at his house on Via della Stufa, which, to Lisa's dismay, was located directly behind the Medici Palace. It was a tiny, shabby alley that ran parallel to Via Larga and Via de' Ginori and led to Piazza San Lorenzo. Could she have ever imagined, during her happy times with Giuliano, that one day she would live just a stone's throw away, by the side of husband she did not love?

A plump matron in a black brocade dress awaited them on the first-floor landing and scrutinized Lisa critically. It was Monna Piera, Francesco's mother, and the pronounced hooked nose beneath her cool grey eyes made her appear unfriendly. Her husband had passed away the previous year. Since then, Francesco had become the head of the family, despite being the youngest of the three brothers who jointly ran the family business. "Why?" Lisa had asked her mother about it. "Because he is the cleverest of them all," Lucrezia had replied.

Lisa sank into a deep curtsey before her mother-in-law. Francesco might be the head of the family business, but in the house, Monna Piera held the power. "Welcome, daughter-in-law," the matriarch said coldly. "Stand up. You'll wrinkle that expensive dress."

As Lisa rose, Monna Piera had already turned away from her and greeted her parents without warmth in her voice.

Francesco led her through a series of rooms into a surprisingly large hall. A massive table was set for at least thirty people.

"Once upon a time, these were three houses," Francesco explained. "My father had them merged into one."

(...)

A bell rang. Monna Piera ordered them to sit. Where was Lisa's place? She felt her elbow being touched again and was guided to a chair in the middle of the table. "Be brave," she heard Francesco whisper softly. "They're not as bad as they look."

"I will never be able to remember all these names," she blurted out. He laughed. "As long as you can remember mine, I'll be satisfied."
"And Monna Piera's name." She bit her tongue. She shouldn't be so outspoken.

"Yes, that wouldn't be a bad idea," Francesco said, smiling. "You are a clever girl. Now, take your seat."

Although Lisa had long since removed her veil, she perceived everything as if from a great distance. The blood-red wine being poured into the Venetian glass goblet in front of her, flowing fiery down her throat. Her father's speech, a little too elaborate, emphasizing the ancient and venerable lineage of the Gherardini family, and her husband's brief, friendly response. The confident looks of her new relatives, their faces merging into one another, their disdainful expressions as they scrutinized her mother's dress, even though it had been specially made of good silk for this occasion, regardless of how much Antonmaria might have protested. The scent of food, overflowing platters of stuffed quails and pigeons, each one so tender that Lisa felt sorry for the birds, who would surely prefer to fly freely in the woods rather than present their thin, featherless legs on her plate. Suddenly, she saw herself outside again in the countryside at the beloved Ca' di Pesa, where she had run into the woods with her siblings, banging pot lids together, early on the morning of the hunt to warn the animals.

"Don't you like it?" Monna Piera asked loudly and conspicuously as her almost untouched plate was taken away. Lisa felt everyone's gaze turning towards her and lowered her head.

"A wise bride avoids filling her stomach too much, Mother," Alfonsina said cheerfully. "Our Lisa seems to anticipate what awaits her."

In the rising, good-natured laughter, Lisa looked over at her parents. Antonmaria stared pale as death at his plate, while Lucrezia gave her a sympathetic glance.

"But to stay completely without sustenance," Giocondo, Francesco's eldest brother, interjected, "doesn't seem particularly wise to me."

"Let's hope that the next course will please our bride better," Monna Piera's voice resounded over the renewed laughter.

Lisa ate a little of the veal and the turnips cooked in ginger. She thought of the beds in the convent garden, the happy expression on her aunt's face as she handed over the precious seeds of the earth. Why can't I just be happy, she thought bitterly, and took another bite under the strict eye of her mother-in-law. Why was this doomed love placed in my heart, if I was only to be torn away from my beloved?

"Here," Francesco said, pushing a piece of liver onto her plate. "Try it. You've surely never eaten anything this good. It's cooked in pomegranate juice. The recipe comes from the Orient. And you must also taste this. Chicken in saffron. A specialty of our chef."

Lisa glanced at Francesco from the side. The oversized chin, the receding hairline. He is now my husband, she thought, and something within her gave in. He meant well with her. She took a deep breath, skewered the liver with her fork, and brought it to her mouth. She hated liver. But she would force herself to eat it too.

As dessert was served, the doors opened, and a group of children charged in. The little ones promptly climbed onto a parent's lap, while the older ones stood politely beside their chairs, gazing longingly at the delicacies piled in pyramids. Candied fruits from Syria, white almond nougat from France, marzipan from Granada, honey-drenched cakes from the Ottoman Empire, poppy seed cake from the distant Kingdom of Poland—and above it all, the sugar replica of the dome of Florence Cathedral. A sigh went through the group of children. All eyes were on Lisa.

"Well, bride," Monna Piera's penetrating voice sounded. "According to our custom, it is up to you to make the little ones happy."

Lisa was startled. But as the expectant faces turned towards her, she suddenly became completely calm. She stood up, and immediately, they all ran around the table towards her.

"One at a time," she admonished them. "Line up nicely, one behind the other. No pushing. Everyone will get their share."

Lost in the moment, she loaded plate after plate with delicacies, delighting in the beaming smiles as the treats were practically snatched from her hands.

"I only want the poppy seed cake," a cheeky girl requested, and Lisa fulfilled her wish. Suddenly, she paused. Why weren't her own siblings invited? Why were only her parents present from her family? As if Lucrezia had read her thoughts, their gazes met across the table.

Then someone tugged at her sleeve. She turned around. A little boy sat on Francesco's lap, one fist shoved well into his mouth, while the other held onto Lisa's sleeve.

"Meo," Lisa exclaimed. She sat down and reached out her arms to lift the boy and give him little kisses on his red-blond hair. His scent of milk and vanilla filled her with confidence.

"You have a son now," Francesco said, his grey-green eyes resting appraisingly on Lisa. "Will you take good care of him?"

Long after she had bidden farewell to her parents and after her new relatives had left or retired to their own chambers, Lisa stood in the bedroom, feeling fear rise within her. She had spent the evening with the children and for a few moments had been able to forget her fate, as the company of the little ones did her so much good. When would she see her siblings again?

Apprehensively, she looked at the large canopy bed with its golden curtains, gathered at the posts with cords. The matching quilted coverlet of the same color had already been turned down, revealing pristine white linen. On both sides of the bed, there were folding screens adorned with paintings of Eastern flowers. Her husband had trade relations with the entire world. Two matching Chinese vases stood on the mantelpiece, with a bowl of fragrant herbs placed between them.

Everything was so foreign. Only one object in the room was familiar to her. It was her trunk from her childhood home, and Lisa couldn't bring herself to open it. It felt as if it contained her entire happy past, and every single memory might dissipate as soon as she lifted the lid.

There was a knock, and Lisa froze. But it was only a maid, a slim young woman of exotic beauty. She was slightly older than Lisa and had the most unusual eyes she had ever seen, a bright golden-green like two ponds reflecting sunlight. Her skin was the color of cinnamon and shimmered like velvet. Just below the white cloth wrapped around her head, some strands of deep black hair were barely visible. Politely, she asked if she could assist the bride in undressing.

"I am Caterina," she said when Lisa inquired about her name. "At your service, my lady." Skilfully, she untied the ribbons and hooks of the bodice at the back. The skirt slid down to the floor. Now Lisa stood there in her chemise, shivering despite the fire in the fireplace.

"I have prepared everything for washing," the maid explained, leading Lisa behind the screen, which was painted with chrysanthemums. There was a washstand, and Caterina poured steaming water from a jug into the basin. "Shall I help you?"

Lisa shook her head, and the maid withdrew. She took off her chemise and reached for the sponge. It was so soft, so large. She moistened it and ran it over the soap, taking in the scent of roses and lavender that enveloped her more and more as she washed, gradually relaxing a little. The towel with which she dried herself was warm, as if it had just come from an oven. She was about to put her chemise back on when Caterina returned, carrying a pile of silk and lace on her arm.

Your nightgown," she said, helping Lisa into it. Like a cool second skin, it caressed her body. Lisa had never worn such fine fabric before, especially directly against her skin.

"You look beautiful," Caterina said, as she tied the ribbons at the front. She bestowed a smile upon Lisa, revealing a row of flawless teeth. "See for yourself."

She led Lisa out from behind the screen and pointed to a tall mirror.

Was that really her? In the convent, there had been no mirrors, and even at home, she had never seen herself in full length. Lisa stared at the figure in the shimmering gown, examining her face with wide-open eyes the color of dark amber; the oval of her face, the small, defiant chin that she had always thought was too small until Giuliano had called it beautiful after endless kisses. Oh, Giuliano. Why did she have to think of him now?

"I believe the master is coming," Caterina said, giving a final adjustment to the lace at the neckline. "Do you need anything else?" she asked.

"Courage," Lisa blurted out, feeling herself blush.

Caterina gently touched her hand and smiled encouragingly.

"There is a vial of oil by the bed," she said softly. Then she withdrew.

Lisa had no time to contemplate what the maid meant by that, as Francesco entered, wrapped in a grey-blue dressing gown and wearing a matching cap on his head. His expression relaxed as he saw Lisa. She had to stop herself from fleeing behind the screen.

"Come to me," he said kindly. Lisa hesitated, but obediently walked towards him. He took her hand and led her to the bed. There, he stopped and looked at her. She had to look up at him; he was so much taller than her. So much stronger than Giuliano had been. Francesco tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and gently ran his fingers over her cheek, tracing the line of her chin and lifting her head.

"You don't need to be afraid," he said. "I am not a rough man. We will have a beautiful time together, I promise you."

"Why did you choose me, of all people?" The question slipped out, as it had preoccupied Lisa for so long.

"Because I like you, Lisa," he answered hoarsely. "I found you very beautiful from the very beginning. Even when you were a flower girl at my wedding with Camilla, you caught my attention. Back then, you were still very young. Today, you are a woman. My wife. And I want you to address me familiarly from now on."

He leaned in, and she closed her eyes. She felt his lips lightly brush against hers, again and again, as gentle as a feather. Then they became more insistent, and he

enveloped her in his arms. He smelled good, of sandalwood and other scents unfamiliar to her.

Lisa felt herself lifted and carried to the bed. He is not repulsive, she told herself, as he gently placed her on the pillows. He is kind, she thought, as he covered her face with kisses, then her neck. He undid the topmost tie of her nightgown, exposing her shoulders, and nuzzled the hollow above her collarbone.

"I love you, Lisa," she heard him whisper, and she felt her resistance melt away. "And I will make you happy."

It was so different from those times with Giuliano. Their love had been new for both of them; they had explored each other and eventually surrendered to that inexplicable intoxication. Giuliano's body had been young like hers, his skin smooth as silk and flawless. When he had been on top of her, his weight hadn't burdened her. Francesco, on the other hand, was a man; his body was hard and hairy, yet his experience compensated for the difference. He gave her time to get used to him, not pressuring her.

"Today, everything you want, my love," he whispered as he slid the silk from her body, caressed her hips, stroked her belly, and gently ran the back of his hand over her thighs. "We have time. If you're not ready yet today..."

That's when she pulled him closer. Giuliano was forever lost, and it was time for her to erase him from her life. Francesco's tenderness had been able to dissolve her resistance and ignite her desire. So why wait any longer?

"Please be gentle," she begged and opened herself to him.

He responded with a sigh, but instead of lying on top of her, he buried his head between her thighs. Lisa let out a soft cry of surprise as he closed his lips around her vulva and explored her innermost depths with his tongue. Her pelvis began to pulsate, and something within her contracted, then slowly expanded, rising, and eventually exploding, overwhelming her like a massive wave crashing over her. And then she felt him enter her, gently yet demanding. She felt him lying on top of her; she noticed the many little hairs tickling her chest, his cheek against hers, rough and slightly scratchy. Then his scent enveloped her, and she sank completely into the experience.

"Admit it, it wasn't so terrible, was it?" he asked later as they lay side by side.

Lisa turned to him. He lay on his side, propped up on one arm, and scrutinized her through half-closed lids. She gazed at his strong shoulders and the reddish shimmering hair on his chest. Although he wasn't overweight, his belly sagged slightly, and his hip bone jutted sharply. Reddish-brown curls thickened above his now flaccid member. Her gaze returned to his face. His eyes rested on her, searching.

"No," she said. "It was..." She shyly snuggled against him. He wasn't handsome, but he treated her well. Whether she could love him, she didn't know yet. However, if he continued to be so gentle with her, life by his side wouldn't be as terrible as she had feared. "It was beautiful," she completed her sentence. And that was the complete truth. Relieved and exhausted from the day's excitements, she fell asleep.

The next morning, she was summoned to Monna Piera. The mistress of the house sat on an armchair, with open household books on the table in front of her. An old servant was leaving the room with a flushed face. "Good morning, mother-in-law," Lisa greeted, hoping that Monna Piera's mood wasn't as bad as her expression indicated.

"Good morning? At this hour?" The patroness regarded Lisa with narrow eyes. "It's already ten o'clock. What have you done so far today?"

"I took care of Meo," Lisa reported, struggling to suppress her rising anger. "And I have been awake since seven."

"You better get rid of the defiance I hear in your voice," Piera retorted. "I really don't know what my Francesco sees in you. He could have made a far better match, you should know. No matter how much your father boasts about his lineage, he still hasn't transferred your dowry, that estate, to you. I wonder when he'll deign to do so. And just so you know, each of my daughters had a dowry worth ten times that." Lisa fell silent, almost trembling with anger. "Come closer," Piera ordered. Lisa obeyed, lowering her gaze to hide her anger. "What kind of dress are you wearing? It's much too small."

Lisa bit her lower lip. Her mother-in-law was right. Apparently, she had grown during the months in the convent. Her old clothes were not tight, as she had become noticeably thinner. However, both the hem and the sleeves were now too short. "Your parents should be ashamed to send you into a marriage like this." "I have grown, mother-in-law. I guess no one expected that." Piera stood up. She was a stately woman, and the fullness of her body made her an imposing figure. She looked sternly down at Lisa. "So, you don't have a single gamurra that fits you?" Lisa didn't answer. She persistently stared at one of the small, glazed stone tiles at her feet, forming a pattern between the larger terracotta slabs. With a deep sigh, the mistress of the house pulled the bell. Immediately, Caterina appeared. "Check if any dresses from the big green chest fit Lisa. They will need alterations. Marietta had a similar figure before she got married." Caterina curtsied and disappeared again. "Well," the matriarch continued. "It will only be for a short time anyway. Once you're pregnant, it all starts again." Piera lifted Lisa's chin and forced her to look her in the face. "I haven't even properly looked

at you yet," she said. "It's a shame. Open your mouth." Lisa couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Well, will you? I want to see your teeth." Lisa felt a surge of indignation. Am I a piece of livestock at the market, she wanted to retort, but she didn't dare. Monna Piera then grasped Lisa's jaw with a surprisingly firm grip and forced it open. Lisa made a startled sound and stepped back. Apparently, her mother-in-law was satisfied with what she had seen. "We were lucky this time. You will take care of them. There's nothing worse than the stench of decaying teeth. Caterina will show you how it's done. Saturdays are for bathing. But I assume you wash yourself daily." Piera let go of her and sat down again. Humiliated, Lisa turned her head away. Her gaze fell on a painting, a portrait of a gentleman in his prime, who bore a striking resemblance to Francesco. Was it his deceased father? Had he been kinder than his wife, or had the painter simply flattered him? Surely no artist would dare to depict Piera as she stood before her now: quarrelsome and full of resentment, as if Lisa had somehow offended her. "Everyone in our family has their duties," her mother-in-law continued. "You are not only a wife now but also a mother. Apart from Bartolomeo, you will take care of all the children that my daughters and my sons' wives will send your way. Can we rely on you?" "Yes," Lisa replied, relieved. After everything she had just experienced with Piera, this task seemed like a reward to her. "Then you're dismissed," Piera said. "You will have dinner with the children first. You will come to the dining room when you have something decent to wear."

"Monna Piera is very harsh with me," Lisa ventured to complain to Francesco in the evening. "I've already heard about it," he replied seriously. "She thinks you're proud and defiant." "She said very ugly things about me and my parents, and..." "I don't want to hear any of it," he interrupted her abruptly, causing her to flinch. "Figure out how to get along with her." And when he saw her shocked expression, he added more gently, "I won't interfere in the affairs of you women here in the house, remember that, Lisa. It's up to you. Once you get to know my mother better, you will appreciate her. Win her heart. It's made of gold." And then he pulled her close, sealed her mouth with his lips, stripped off her nightgown, and enveloped her in his tenderness.

[END OF SAMPLE]