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opening extract from

The Medici Seal

written by

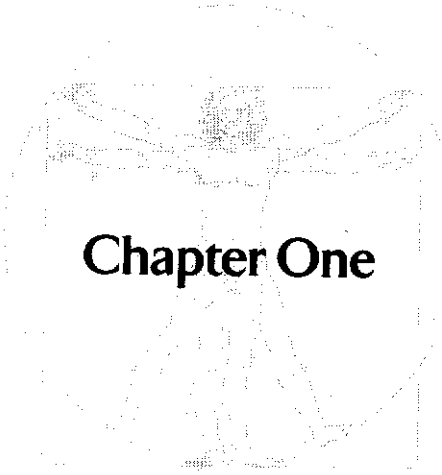
Theresa Breslin

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Chapter One

The first blow struck the side of my head.

I stagger, almost falling to the ground.

Sandino moves forward, stepping over the man lying dead at his feet. The man I saw him murder. Now he means to kill me.

I stumble back.

He thrusts out his cudgel, jabbing it hard into my gut.

Doubled up, I scrabble onto the rocks away from him.

He grunts in annoyance and follows.

I glance around desperately. Only the river, behind and below me, rushing in full flood.

Sandino grins. 'No escape for you, boy.'

He raises his arm. Swings his cudgel again.

I jerk my head away to avoid his next blow. My feet slip on the wet surface.

He shouts a curse.

I am falling.

The sudden shock of cold water.

And the river has me.

The current batters my body, grabbing at my clothes, dragging my legs. I swallow great lumps of water but I force my head to the surface and try to swim. My flailing is useless against the strength of the flow as it hurtles me onwards in its greedy grasp. I must try to reach one side of the riverbank. I must.

But I am weakening. Unable to keep my head up.

Then a sound fills me with terror. A waterfall!

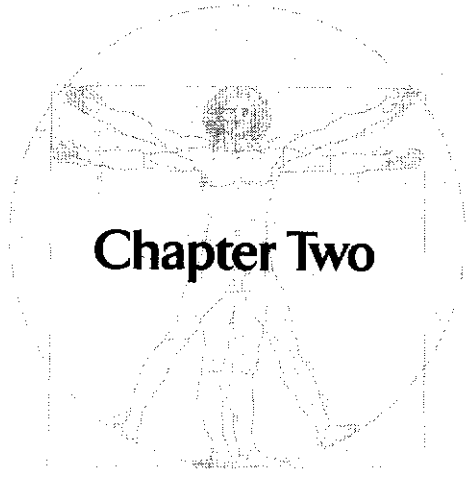
The noise becomes louder, the water swifter. I am seconds from death. With a last effort I throw up my arms and scream for help. I am flung over the waterfall and slammed down into the foaming, broiling torrent.

A thundering mass of churning water pounds at me, driving me under. Caught in the whirlpool, I cannot break free of its deadly force. My face is upturned, mouth stretched wide, desperately sucking for air. The falling water distorts my vision. A shattered rainbow. Beyond it is light and life. My eyes roll back, blood roaring in my brain.

Now I seem to see myself from a great height. As though my mind views my body from another plane. Removed from this Earth to a different place, I look down and watch the frantic, dying struggles of a ten-year-old boy.

Clawing. Breath. None now.

Splintered light and utter darkness.



Chapter Two

Two hands grasp my head.

I see nothing. Hear no sound. No smell enters my nostrils. But touch, yes. Long fingers under my chin and, firmly, across my brow. A mouth, oh so gently, over mine. Covering my lips with his own. Completely. Breathing life into me with his kiss.

My lids open up. The face of a man looks down on me.

'I am Leonardo da Vinci,' the man says. 'My companions pulled you from the river.'

He tucks the folds of a cloak around me.

I blink. The colour of the sky sears my eyes, cold, and painfully blue.

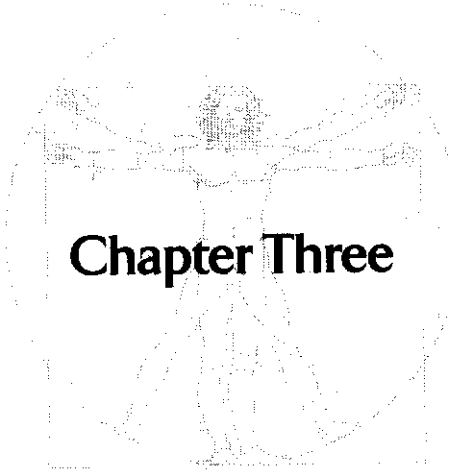
'What is your name?' he asks me.

'Matteo,' I whisper.

'Matteo.' His voice curls round each syllable. 'That is a fine name.'

The features of his face blur. I cough, vomiting water and blood. 'I am going to die,' I say, and begin to cry.

He wipes my cheeks with his hand. 'No,' he replies. 'You are going to live, Matteo.'



Chapter Three

He calls me Matteo.

This is because, when he rescued me from under the waterfall, although half drowned, I had enough wit not to give my real name, and Matteo was the first one that came to hand.

Like the name, almost everything else I told him about me after that was a lie.

On the day of my rescue they made a little campfire there, he with his two companions, beside the waterfall, to try to dry me off. I would have liked to put as much distance as possible between myself and that place but I had no choice. My head was cracked from Sandino's blow and I could scarcely stand, let alone walk away. They wrapped me in the fur-lined cloak and laid me near the fire they had built. It was late summer. The weather was not very cold, but the days were growing shorter and the sun swung lower across the sky.

'*Zingaro?*'

The fatter of his two companions spoke their word for 'gypsy' as he put kindling on the fire.

I closed my eyes as the one called Leonardo glanced in my direction. 'He has the look of those people, and yet . . .'

The third man, whose cloak I was lying on, shook his head. 'It could be he's one of a group travelling south. The nomads have now been banned from entering Milan, accused of all sorts of theft and chicanery.'

'There is a gypsy encampment at Bologna,' said the fat man. 'That's not so far from here.'

I tensed as I heard them say this. Bologna was where my people would settle to pass this winter. If these men thought me Gypsy then they might decide to take me to them. If that happened, then I would be recognized, welcomed and brought in. But I did not want to go to Bologna. It would be one of the first places that the brigand Sandino would look for me if he thought there was a chance I was still alive. Indeed he might have already sent someone ahead on the road to catch me in case I sought refuge there. He would surmise I had nowhere else to go, so some of his own vile men would be dispatched with instructions to bring me to him, their leader, if I appeared. I shivered as I recalled the blow Sandino's great cudgel had struck me, which had caused me to fall into the river and be swept away.

The man Leonardo, who had breathed on me to force the water from my lungs, said, 'The boy is small-formed, but then that might be due to malnutrition. It will become clear soon enough if he is one of those proscribed when we listen to what he says when he awakens.'

I knew then not to tell them my origins. They might be sympathetic to a drowning boy, but their minds were already set against my race.

Travelling people are known in many lands. We have a reputation as good farriers, skilled basket weavers and metal workers, and the gift of being able to foretell the future. This latter talent is suspect, but if requested, with payment, to tell a person's destiny, then a gypsy, like anyone else, can make a fair guess as to what that person's future might bring.

My grandmother was very good at it. She practised the art of conversation, so that anyone who spoke to her soon found that they had told her much more about themselves than they imagined. Then she would fit her advice to the situation, as a tailor cuts cloth to suit the customer. But my grandmother was

a true healer. She understood sickness of the body, and of the spirit. Often it was the ache of humanity that troubled people – unrequited love, loneliness, the fear of growing old.

Many came to her for remedies. It was not mystical insight that allowed her to discern what ailed a person, but simple observation, as straightforward as studying the sky to predict the weather, or the trees to tell the seasons of the year. One only had to look with attention and interpret what one saw.

A person whose eye-whites were tinged with yellow had sickness of the liver or the kidneys and needed an infusion of parsley herb to purify the blood. For someone showing sleeplessness and anxiety, she recommended camomile for relaxation, and the milky juice extracted from lettuce as a sedative. She could tell if a woman was barren by the condition of her neck. Dry skin gathered there, or folded wrinkles, indicated an empty womb. The woman would be in awe of my grandmother, who knew her request without being told, and would go away with new hope, holding a purge made from rue and juniper berries to clear the pathways to the womb.

Young girls often wanted a means to tell the identity of their true love. They were given stalks of yarrow to place under their pillow and some words to recite before going to sleep:

By the feet of Venus thou dost grow,
O herb whose true name is Yarrow,
Let me dream of my true love,
Ere I wake tomorrow.

My grandmother knew all these things and many more secrets of country lore.

She also knew the time of her own dying.

This was not because she had second sight. More that she had knowledge of how the heart should beat, and became aware that hers was becoming weaker.

These divinations are not magical and do not require any special gift – that is, unless the absence of stupidity is deemed a gift. But such skill arouses jealousy in others and this was why we could never rest in one place for long. The town guilds and other businessmen did not like any kind of competition. And such is the prejudice against us that, without having been convicted or even accused of any wrong, being gypsy alone can mean death.

So I decided that I would lie. I began to prepare a story to tell my rescuers as I watched them from under half-closed lids.

They certainly weren't mercenaries for they carried no arms. Their horses were of fine stock, with sturdy haunches rather than for show, built for covering distances more than for speed. No hunting equipment was attached to their saddles; their food consisted of basic items: cheese, bread, fruit and wine. I deduced that they must travel each day and rest in accommodation of some kind by night.

I tried to puzzle the purpose of their journey. The saddlebags were bulky, but not with goods or cloth. It was books and papers they held. But these three men were neither merchants nor traders, and between them rank did not seem to matter much. They were at ease in each other's company, yet they deferred to the man Leonardo da Vinci, he who had pronounced my name so carefully.

From the beginning I called him Maestro. I was corrected later by one of his companions to use the term Messer, which, in some ways, is of greater status, but at that time he interrupted and said, 'If it pleases the boy to call me Maestro, then so be it. Let him call me Maestro if he wishes.'

In my mind he is always Maestro.