



# A BOLT *from the* BLUE

*A  
Leonardo  
da Vinci  
Mystery*

"I hope that Leonardo da Vinci and Dino  
will return many times in the future."  
—Mary Jo Putney

FIRST TIME  
IN PRINT

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## Chapter 1

### ***Duchy of Milan Spring 1484***

Wrongfully do men lament the flight of time . . .  
—Leonardo da Vinci, *Codex Atlanticus*

Bright brown eyes peered over the edge of my notebook, the unexpected sight distracting me from the portrait in which I had been engrossed. I had not anticipated company; indeed, I had chosen a secluded spot in which to work so that I might pass the day undisturbed. And thus I was settled in a sunny patch of grass in a far corner of the great fortress that was home to the iron-fisted Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. Away from the bustling parade grounds and paved courtyards, and far from the main castle, itself, I'd thought myself quite alone here beside this low stone wall.

But apparently I was not.

Attempting to discourage further interruption, I frowned at the interloper. Undeterred, he widened his gentle cinnamon orbs in soulful appeal. My next tactic was to ignore his presence, but that reaction merely drew a small snuffle from him. In the end—as he had doubtless foreseen—I found myself unable to resist such blatant supplication. And so I allowed my stern expression to soften as I tucked my piece of black chalk into the book as a marker before addressing him.

“Hello, Pio. How ever did you find me here, and why are you intent on disturbing my

work this fine morning?”

The small black and white hound cocked his narrow head, his rose petal–like ears unfurling as if considering the question. Then, with a happy bark, he leaped into my lap and dislodged the notebook so that it tumbled to the ground.

“Fear not, Dino, Pio is not trying to disturb you,” a reproachful voice spoke as I attempted to fend off the small beast’s enthusiastic licking of my face. “He just wants to know why you are angry at us. He wonders why you have been avoiding us for the past few days.”

I glanced up to see my friend and fellow apprentice, Vittorio, standing before me. Like me, he was dressed in the simple brown tunic over green trunk hose that designated him an apprentice painter in the workshop of the duke’s court artist. To enliven that simple garb, he had braided narrow leather strips into an elaborate belt from which he’d hung his purse. He reached into that small bag now and pulled forth a crumb of pungent cheese.

“I’ve not avoided you,” I protested while he waved the treat in Pio’s direction. “Did we not spend all of yesterday plastering a wall for fresco together? And the day before, I showed you how to tie the small weasel-hair brushes that the Master prefers for his oils.”

“But that is different,” the boy countered as Pio bounded from my lap and began an eager dance upon his hind legs. “All of the apprentices helped with the plastering, and you showed Philippe and Bernardo how to tie those brushes, too. But when I tried to seek you out after supper each of those days, you were nowhere to be found. And I am certain that this morning, before you ran off alone with your notebook, you pretended

not to hear me calling you.”

The offended set to his mouth was a stark contrast to his habitual expression of mischievous glee and made him look older than his sixteen years. Even Pio’s clownish behavior for once did not bring a smile to his face. Instead, his glum expression as he laid forth his list of my perceived transgressions quite reflected my own unsettled mood.

Strange that we both should be downtrodden, I told myself, given the special circumstances of this particular day. Being that it was Sunday, we would have enjoyed a few hours of freedom after our obligatory appearance at Mass before returning to our usual duties in the afternoon. But the Master found himself with pressing business outside the castle and had announced an entire day’s holiday for his apprentices.

Still, our freedom would not be absolute. In return for this unexpected bounty, he had decreed that we were to use our time honing our craft in one way or another. This meant a day spent sketching or painting or else making detailed notes on any of the various techniques we had learned under his tutelage. But while we were on our honor to follow his wishes, none of us considered secretly sleeping or gambling away our day, instead.

After all, any number of aspiring young painters were waiting in line for the opportunity to be apprenticed to the Duke of Milan’s master engineer and court artist, Leonardo the Florentine . . . the multitalented man of genius also known as Leonardo da Vinci.

Vittorio tossed Pio the cheese and, not waiting to be invited, dropped to the grass beside me. The hound placed insistent front paws on Vittorio’s knee and gave a polite bark to express his hope that additional food was to come. But even the enthusiastic

wagging of his whiplike tail was not enough to return a smile to young apprentice's face. Instead, his frown deepened, and he sighed with great drama.

Retrieving my notebook, I brushed a bit of dried grass from its cover and suppressed a sigh of my own. I knew the boy would not be content to leave without hearing words of reassurance.

"I'm not mad at you, Vittorio, or at Pio," I explained. "And I have not been avoiding you; at least, not purposely. It's just that I—"

I hesitated, a dozen explanations rising to my lips, but none I could speak aloud. I could not tell the boy that my desire for solitude sprang from the tragedy of several months ago. Neither did I dare recount my memories of the events of that, like some ghastly and unending feast day pageant, continued to play in my thoughts. For none of the apprentices knew of my prominent role in that heartrending event that had stunned even the most hardened of men at Castle Sforza.

Indeed, only two people were aware of my involvement.

Leonardo was one. It had been at his behest that I had left my identity as the apprentice Dino and boldly disguised myself as a servant girl to a young contessa. Thus smuggled into the noble household, I had served as the Master's eyes and ears in an attempt to learn the identity of a murderer who preyed upon baseborn women.

It had started as a righteous enough undertaking. Soon, however, our clever plan unraveled, while our attempts to bring justice instead had ushered in tragedy. Leonardo had joined me as horrified witness to that final terrible night when two lives had been most grievously lost. The Master and I narrowly escaped death, ourselves . . . though for some time after, I'd cursed the fact that I had lived while the others had not.

The second person who'd been privy to my daring masquerade was Luigi the tailor. Once an enemy and now my dear friend, Signore Luigi was my sole confidant in Milan. He was the only one who knew my other, more closely held secret, the secret I thus far had kept hidden even from Leonardo. And for that reason, no one but the tailor understood the true reason for my grief over what had transpired.

I shut my eyes against the soul-searing memories that swept me. Again, I saw the fire blazing through the darkened tower, burning with unimaginable ferocity around a beautiful young woman. Her features twisted in fearful agony as the flames would not be tamed but leaped upon her like blistering serpents. More swiftly than I could imagine, they consumed her glittering white gown and began searing her flesh.

Her screams were echoed by the harsh cry of a dark-haired man dressed in black who was quite as beautiful as she. He ran toward her, his face a mask of horror as he realized he was far too late, that he could not save her. But grim purpose sent him rushing into the fire to join her, determined that he would spare her, nonetheless.

I could not hold back the terrifying vision of the pair wrapped in a fiery embrace from which there could be no escape, save into the cold night. He knew that was the only hope left to them, and so he had made his terrible choice. Intertwined for all eternity, the two had blazed like twin shooting stars as they tumbled from the burning tower to meet their deaths in the darkness below.

Shoving those memories back into a far corner of my mind, I opened my eyes again to meet Vittorio's concerned gaze. He still awaited my answer, and so I seized upon a defense that he would have no cause to question.

"It's just that I have been missing my family, of late," I replied. "I felt the need to be

by myself for a time, lest I be poor company to the rest of you.”

As I'd hoped, Vittorio's condemning expression yielded, and he gave a sympathetic nod. And there was some small truth to that particular explanation. Most of us apprentices had come from towns other than Milan, so that visits with our family were few, if any at all. I had not seen my parents and brothers for more than a year now, though twice my father and I had managed to exchange missives when someone from our town happened to be traveling in either direction.

A master cabinetmaker, Angelo della Fazia's skill in wood rivaled Leonardo's brilliance with paints. He had understood the artistic fervor that had driven me to steal away one night, leaving behind home and family in order to study my craft. And he also understood that, given my circumstances, I could not return home so long as I remained apprenticed to Leonardo.

Teasing the hound now with a long bit of grass, Vittorio confided, “I miss my father and sisters, too. But I am much relieved to know I have done naught to offend you. And I know you could never truly be cross with Pio, no matter what mischief he caused, for you love him as much as I do. So, if all is truly well, I shall leave you be.”

Contrary to his words, however, he remained seated next to me. Knowing there must be some other reason that the youth had sought me out, I prodded, “The day is already half gone. Why are you still here at the castle, rather than wandering about town with Constantin and Paulo and the other apprentices?”

“The Master asked me to take charge of Pio for the day. I could not refuse, for Pio loves me best . . . after the Master, of course,” he finished with a smug lift of his chin.

I gave him an answering solemn nod.

“Of course,” I agreed, though my inner amusement at his self-important air was tempered by my recollection of how the small hound had ended up in the Master’s care.

The clownish Pio had once been the beloved pet of the same young contessa who was one of the victims that I mourned. Under her care, the little beast had spent his days sleeping upon soft cushions, eating rich treats, and wearing elaborate embroidered collars as befitted his noble position. More privileged than many at court, he’d even had his portrait painted by the great master Leonardo!

It was during those painting sessions that the Master had developed a particular fondness for the small hound. And when no one else stepped forward to claim Pio after the contessa’s death, the Master had adopted him. Now, Pio spent his days snoozing in a sunny spot in Leonardo’s personal quarters or else wandering the workshop making a friendly nuisance of himself with the apprentices.

“Look, Dino,” Vittorio exclaimed, interrupting my momentary musings. “I made a present for Pio. Is it not fine?”

He indicated the wide braided collar that the hound wore around his slim neck. More elaborate than Vittorio’s own belt, the collar was nothing short of a leather tapestry made of intricate knots and weaves.

“And see how I’ve made a matching rope to lead him with,” he went on, reaching beneath his tunic and pulling out a long length of braided leather.

He tied that narrow rope to the collar and looped the other end around his belt, so that the hound could wander a few feet from him but not run free. “I think with his new collar, Pio looks every bit as elegant as he ever did when he lived in the main castle.”

“He does,” I agreed, well impressed with the youth’s skill. “Your creations are

wonderful, Vittorio. Why, from a distance, the leather looks like beaten metal. Have you showed this work to the Master?"

"I did not wish to bother him with such trifles," the boy replied with a careless shrug, though the color rising in his cheeks told me he was pleased with my compliments. "But that is why I have been looking for you. You see, I made something else, and I wanted your opinion."

Reaching into his tunic this time, he withdrew a ring of leather similar Pio's collar. He handed it to me, and I realized that it was the perfect size for a lady's bracelet. Unthinkingly, I slipped the leather bauble over my wrist to better admire it.

As with Pio's clever adornment, Vittorio had braided and knotted bits of leather to create a seamless circle. This piece, however, had been crafted with far greater skill. The leather threads were almost as delicate as wire, and he had twisted them into an open filigree pattern to which he'd added bits of colored minerals. Those tiny beads were similar to the large specimens we ground to make the various bright-hued pigments for frescoes, and I guessed that the youth had shaped them from scraps he had swept up from the workshop floor. It was a beautiful example that I was certain had taken many hours of work.

"Any woman would be glad to wear such a fine bracelet," I declared with an admiring nod.

Vittorio's blush deepened. "I am glad you like it. I made it especially for a certain girl. She—she doesn't know that I like her, and I've been afraid to say anything to her. I hope that giving her this bracelet will let her know how I feel."

He smiled at me shyly, his expression hopeful and brimming with a secret

knowledge at odds with his usual boyish openness.

Meeting his gaze, I was momentarily puzzled. In the next instant, I was swept by the fearful certainty that Vittorio had discovered the truth about me that even Leonardo did not know. Why else would he have sought me out away from the others, if not to clandestinely confront me with what he had learned? And yet, how could it be? How had he unraveled the secret that had allowed me to remain as apprentice these many months?

How had Vittorio contrived to learn that I was not the boy, Dino, as I claimed to be . . . but was instead Delfina della Fazia, a young woman who had disguised herself as a male in order to study painting with the greatest master in Milan and all the surrounding provinces!

I snatched off the bracelet and thrust it toward him.

“Pray tell me you have said naught of this to anyone else, especially not the Master,” I cried, leaping to my feet with a swiftness that sent Pio scrambling out of my way. “You must know that your affection is sorely misplaced. Let us pretend you never spoke such foolish thoughts.”

“What can you mean, Dino?”

The youth’s smile faded into uncertainty. He stared up at me with wide eyes, his blush fading and his expression one of dismay. “Are you saying I should forget that I love Novella?”

“Novella?” Now it was my turn to stare. “Who is she?”

“Why, she is Rebecca the washerwoman’s daughter,” he replied, his gaze dropping in misery to the bracelet he was turning about in his hands. “She has always been

friendly to me, and I thought . . . that is, I hoped . . .”

He trailed off with a shake of his head. Pio, sensing trouble, put a cold nose to the boy’s pale cheek in sympathy. As for me, my fear of discovery was washed away by a hot wave of embarrassment. So wrapped up had I been in my own concerns that I had let myself believe that mine was the sole small drama being played out among my fellow apprentices. And now, my thoughtless words had caused Vittorio pain.

Eager to make amends, I seized an excuse to help mend those emotions that I had frayed.

“Pay no heed to my words,” I urged, dropping back down beside him and giving his shoulder an encouraging shake. “I—I thought you spoke of someone far older than you. I do know Rebecca’s daughter, and I am certain I have seen her give you favorable smiles when you were not watching.”

“You have?” A flicker of his earlier grin reappeared. “Do you think she will like my bracelet?”

“I’m sure she will think it a fine gift. Perhaps she will offer to launder your tunic in return . . . that is, if she can manage to chisel it off your back, first.”

With this small jest—Vittorio was known for his overly enthusiastic approach to plastering a wall—I managed a brief grin back at him. I fervently hoped that I spoke the truth about the girl whose name I had never known until now. Still, I had encountered her several times before, trailing in shy silence after her mother and usually burdened by a basket of linens almost as large as she.

She was a lovely child of Vittorio’s same age, possessing the airy grace reminiscent of mythology’s nymphs. Her delicate features could have graced one of Leonardo’s

frescoes, while her pale curls beneath a sober white cap were almost as unruly as Vittorio's tangle of blond locks. In appearance, at least, the pair seemed well-suited. Whether she had ever taken notice of the boy, I did not know. But a handsome young painter would be a fine catch for a girl burdened by her mother's lowly station.

I frowned a little as I considered this last.

While washerwomen ranked little better than prostitutes among society's more downtrodden, I had never understood why they were dismissed as scandalous creatures. Did washerwomen not work long and hard and for meager pay? I could think of far more disreputable ways to earn good coin than scrubbing and carting about baskets of wet clothing that were heavy enough to stagger many a man.

Perhaps their seductive reputation stemmed from the fact that they dealt so intimately with male garments, routinely touching the same fabric that had had contact with a man's most private areas. Or perhaps there was another, crueller reason for such universal condemnation. For such women were dependent upon no man for their livelihoods but made their own way in the world. How better to put them in their place again than by besmirching their reputations and reminding them that they were subordinate to the male species?

Then my frown faded. I was certain that Rebecca did not consider herself any man's inferior. A large, black-browed woman of middle years with a brash grin and the familiar red-chapped hands and arms of her profession, she wore her starched white wimple proudly as if it were a crown. She'd first come to my notice several months earlier, when she had elbowed me out of the way to get a better look at a dead woman. She had later played a brief role during the Master's investigation of that same

suspicious death.

As often happened when Leonardo was involved, the unlikely pair struck up a friendship of sorts. Rebecca eventually had taken over the laundering of his clothes, while the Master had used her as a model for a series of sketches of the common folk. It had been in this capacity that I had made her acquaintance.

As for the fact that she had a daughter but no husband, I found the situation rather less scandalous than amazing. I also knew I was not the only one who secretly marveled that a woman possessed of as few physical charms as she could have found a willing bedmate, let alone produce from that coupling so lovely and graceful a child as the ethereal Novella. The man who had lain with her must have been handsome beyond belief and doubtless blinded by love. That or his sole encounters with her had been in the dark!

While I had busied myself with such thoughts, Vittorio appeared to regain his usual carefree air in the wake of my assurances. Tucking the bracelet back in his tunic, he stood. Pio, who had been distracted during the course of our conversation by a lark that had lit upon the wall, now looked eagerly at the boy.

“Come, Pio. We shall leave Dino and his gloomy face to mope here in the shadows while we pay a visit to someone much prettier,” he told the small hound, who gave an agreeable bark. To me, he added, “Unless, of course, you wish to walk part of the way with us?”

His tone and expression were hopeful, so that I knew he would be disappointed should I turn him down. I reminded myself that I had been ensconced in my spot since early morning. Perhaps it would do me well to shake off the worrisome cloak of the past

for a time and enjoy a bit of amusement.

“I’m sure the Master would not expect me to spend the entire day hunched over my notebook,” I agreed and rose once more. The volume in question, I took care to tuck under my arm lest it spur his curiosity. I was certain that Vittorio would not ask to see my work unless I first offered; still, I had to be on my guard, as this day’s sketches were ones that I was loath to share.

“I’ll go with you as far as the workshop,” I offered instead, “else I know I will never hear the end of your complaints. But I wonder, Vittorio, if your feet are as swift as your tongue?”

He gave me a quizzical look. Before he had time to question my meaning aloud, however, I flashed him a grin and took off at a run.