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THE FLAMES OF FLORENCE

**Da Vinci's Disciples
Book Three**

DONNA RUSSO MORIN

Diversion Books
A Division of Diversion Publishing Corp.
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New York, New York 10016
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First Diversion Books edition May 2018.
Print ISBN: 978-1-63576-379-9

Praise for *Portrait of a Conspiracy*

“...a page-turner unlike any historical novel, weaving passion, adventure, artistic rebirth, and consequences of ambition... a masterful writer at the peak of her craft.”

—C. W. Gortner, Author of *The Confessions of Catherine de' Medici*

“In *Portrait of a Conspiracy*, Russo Morin’s prose is as sharp as a Medici dagger... Thwarting danger, finding love, and creating masterpieces, [these women] remind us just how powerful the bonds of womanhood can be.”

—Marci Jefferson, Author of *The Enchantress of Paris*

“This riveting book is filled with art, assassinations, retribution, and a sisterhood of fascinating women who inspire as well as entertain.”

—Stephanie Dray, New York Times bestselling Author of *America’s First Daughter*

“Illicit plots, mysterious paintings, and a young Leonardo da Vinci all have their part to play in this delicious, heart-pounding tale.”

—Kate Quinn, USA Today Bestselling Author of *The Alice Network*

“Russo Morin’s elegant command of language and composition left me breathless, but the story itself, with its flawless depiction of power, corruption, defiance, intrigue and retribution makes *Portrait of a Conspiracy* an absolute must read.”

—Flashlight Commentary

“This riveting historical fiction novel [is] filled with art, passion, and violence. A portrait of the dangerous beauty of Renaissance Florence.”

—The Florentine

“The action is fierce and the stillness is resplendent with intensity of being. The suspense is thrilling and intelligent. The writing is masterful.”

—Open Book Society

“Elegant and Intriguing!”

—Red Carpet Crash

Praise for *The Competition*

“What is unique about these women is not only their loyalty as wives, daughters, and mothers, but also the fierceness of their artistic sensibilities, which must find satisfaction in producing works of phenomenal beauty. *Superb historical fiction and a must read!*”

--Historical Novel Society, Editor’s Choice

"*THE COMPETITION* is a page-turning, provocative romp through a fascinating time and place—15th-century Florence. Donna Russo Morin has given us a novel for our time, a book featuring strong female characters fighting the odds to break the “glass ceiling,” and reminding us that this battle is not new: women have been waging it for centuries.

—Sherry Jones,

Author of *The Sharp Hook of Love: A Novel of Heloise and Abelard*

"In elegant prose, Morin paints a captivating tale of courageous women painters who battle against prejudices in Renaissance Florence. Featuring strong women characters, each with distinctive personalities, this is exactly the type of historical novel I enjoy. Exhilarating and compassionate, *The Competition* sings a beautiful tribute of women's talents and underscores Morin's masterful storytelling. Delightful!"

—Weina Dai Randel,

Author of *The Moon in the Palace* and *The Empress of Bright Moon*

“An inspiring tale of determined women, empowered by undeniable talent, in the male-dominated art world of Renaissance Florence. In *The Competition*, Ms. Russo Morin delivers a captivating story rich with historical detail and beautifully woven through with atmosphere.”

—Diane Haeger, Author of *Courtesan*

“...an inspiring work of historical fiction that should not be missed.”

--True Book Addict

“Filled with great detail and other historical figures at the time, this book was a real treat!”

--A Bookish Affair

“If you enjoy historical fiction, romance, superb character development, and stories where characters seek to make a difference in their world, you need to read the *Da Vinci's Disciples* series by Donna Russo Morin.

--The Book Connection

Also by Donna Russo Morin:

Portrait of a Conspiracy: Da Vinci's Disciples Book One

The Competition: Da Vinci's Disciples Book Two

The King's Agent

To Serve a King

The Secret of the Glass

The Courtier's Secret

Also Coming in 2018

Gilded Summers

*For all who hear, 'no, you can't,'
yet believe, 'yes, I can!'*

From the ashes, glories arise

Chapter One

*“The world is never still;
It moves forward whether we wish it to or not.”*

Their faces had changed; time had marched across some, leaving its tracks. New faces had sprouted like the first crocuses of spring. Yet whatever form they took, they stood by each other as life spun its web around them.

They stood in the sun now, free of the shadows, with its warmth fluttering down upon their shoulders. She had been one of the first, one of the founders, a tender, delicate bloom of wisdom. She had been with them at the other funeral, that of the man whose life had made the transformation in theirs possible. The man who had changed all of Florence, planting seeds of it, reveling in their blossoms, and sharing their glory with the world. He had known the importance of art, had tended it the way it needed to flourish, as they had flourished.

Together they had survived as Florence had survived, barely. The Medicis, doomed since the death of Lorenzo ‘Il Magnifico’ de Medici, had been ousted. War had weakened Florence’s trunk as well as her branches. And strangeness had descended upon them in the form of a tonsured, cloaked figure, a shadow whose length grew ever longer, all encompassing.

Hope born on audacity, raised on bravery had changed them. As they watched their dearest friend lowered into the ground, where her ashes would live forever, they knew they too would remain eternal; they would be, now and forever... Da Vinci’s Disciples.

Viviana sat in the cavernous Duomo cathedral, sat far back upon the benches where anyone of any rank could sit. She had not often returned to this cathedral, one of the grandest in all of Europe. When one sees a murder, especially murder upon a church altar, it becomes too difficult

to see anything else. It would forever be impossible to stand beneath the vaulted chamber without remembering, without seeing the blood as she had on that fateful day so long ago, without seeing the glorious face of Giuliano de' Medici as he took his last breath.

She should have gone to hear the man preach long before now—the man who had given himself the moniker of *piccolo frate*, the little friar—while he still served Mass at his monastery of San Marco; the crowds he drew rendered that possible. No longer was there space available at the monastery large enough to accommodate them all, all those who craved to hear his words, who cried upon them.

Viviana sat alone, had come alone; why she could not say. Perhaps it was to take in the measure of the man, and his words, free from another's reaction, from anyone's but her own. Her husband was on duty, her children were with their own families in their own parishes; there was nothing that prevented her attendance in the cathedral that day, nothing untoward. Yet she felt not only guilt, but shame.

Looking around the mammoth dome with its seemingly limitless columns, its exquisite art, there was little more worth looking at that day than the flood of people that continued to file in, no matter how tightly they must squeeze themselves together to do so. They came from all ranks of the rank obsessed Florentine society, from the poorest to the noblest and the many in between.

Her legs jittered nervously beneath her gown; time seemed to tick of its own accord, dictated not by the ticking of any clock. The longer she waited, the slower it ticked.

A low hum entered the cathedral, ebbed through the dome. The parishioners rose. He walked in.

Him? That is him? Surely, it cannot be.

The hum grew to a buzz; most of the congregants bowed. It was indeed him; it was Fra Girolamo Savonarola. No one would have blamed her for her cynicism, not even the friar himself, for he often spoke of his odd countenance, his unimpressive figure. The little friar.

Little, most certainly.

In his rough clothed grey robe of the Dominicans, the friar resembled a walking tree stump, a thin tree, a short stump. As he moved toward the pulpit, he removed the cowl—that which he wore whenever he did not stand upon at the pulpit—revealing his face.

That is, by far, one of the strangest faces I have ever seen, Viviana thought. It is a face worthy of my paints.

She almost laughed aloud; that was one commission on which she would never consider to bid. The hollow cheeks and the long, hooked nose disagreed with his thick, almost sensual lips. There was something in his eyes, however; black beneath dark, heavy brows, they burned with intensity, as if one could see fire within them.

What an odd little creature.

Despite his eyes, Viviana found nothing in his appearance to have wrought the growing following he culled within the city, many of whom had followed him about Tuscany and the multitude of churches and monastery at which he preached. No, she found nothing so distinctive about him.

Until he opened his mouth to speak.

This was no sermon to calm the congregation, to speak of the promise of eternal salvation. This was a man seeking to control. He railed against gamblers, blasphemers, and sodomites. He went further still.

“Lo, the sword has descended. Finally, the scourge has fallen upon us and the prophecies have reached their fulfilment. Lo, it is the Lord God Himself who leads his army. Such a thing was not prophesied by me, but by God Himself. And it is now coming into being. More than that, it is taking place before our very eyes.”

He raged; his strange face blistered with it. Perhaps not the regular church goer she should be, Viviana knew her catechism well enough to recognize words from the Book of Genesis, teachings filled with rage, words filled with the prophesy of doom, not in the afterlife, but here, now.

Viviana began to understand; within that small body lay a driving force. She knew not if it was ambition or true power, but he was a compelled man and each word he spoke plowed with the same driving force.

He certainly knows how to put on a performance.

The preacher used not only irony and parody but humor as well, even if his words were polemic: from passionate invective flights or lowly plain harangues. Arms flaying, hands pounding on the pulpit. No matter the shape or structure of the words, the message below the message was to instill mortal fear.

Viviana took not a word he said into her soul, yet he still frightened her. She did not cower at his tirades of eternity in Hell...she feared *him*. In the grip of his rhetoric, many congregants cried; their tears led others to tears, until they seemed to cry out to the friar with one voice, one surge of hysteria.

“Do not take things that are mutable; material goods, honors, and philosophy are mutable things of the world; do not collect these things, because they will deceive you. Do you wish to be

free? Then above all things, love God, love your neighbor, love one another, love the common weal; then you will have true liberty.”

With each denunciation of their lives, the congregation bobbed their heads as if controlled with the undulations of a hand, as if a string attached their heads to his hands. Women blubbered, holding on dearly to one another. Men dropped to their knees in shame and the hope of deliverance. They were under his spell and no comment was too outrageous or too far from the true meaning of any Bible passage; they accepted, believed, and became someone other than themselves.

The Mass ended. The mesmerized throng came to life, rushing toward the altar and the little friar upon it.

Viviana hurried in the other direction, out the door, to where the sun and its glory washed her free of all that she had just seen and heard. As her feet pounded on the cobbles, refusing to move as fast as she wished they would, four words pounded in her mind with each stomp of a foot.

The man is dangerous.