

I

Torches gleamed and flickered high on the towers of the Palazzo Vecchio and the Bargello, and just a few lanterns shimmered in the cathedral square a little way to the north. Some also illuminated the quays along the banks of the River Arno, where, late as it was for a city where most people retired indoors with the coming of night, a few sailors and stevedores could be seen through the gloom. Some of the sailors, still attending to their ships and boats, hastened to make final repairs to rigging and to coil rope neatly on the dark, scrubbed decks, while the stevedores hurried to haul or carry cargo to the safety of the nearby warehouses.

Lights also glimmered in the winehouses and the brothels, but very few people walked the streets. It had been seven years since the then twenty-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici had been elected to the leadership of the city, bringing with him at least a sense of order and calm to the intense rivalry between the leading international banking and merchant families who had made Florence one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Despite this, the city had never ceased to simmer, and occasionally boil over, as each faction strove for control, some of

them shifting alliances, some remaining permanent and implacable enemies.

Florence, in the Year of Our Lord 1476, even on a jasmine-sweet evening in spring, when you could almost forget the stench from the Arno if the wind was in the right direction, wasn't the safest place to be out in the open, after the sun had gone down.

The moon had risen in a now-cobalt sky, lording it over a host of attendant stars. Its light fell on the open square where the Ponte Vecchio, its crowded shops dark and silent now, joined the north bank of the river. Its light also found out a figure clad in black, standing on the roof of the church of Santo Stefano al Ponte. A young man, only seventeen years old, but tall and proud. Surveying the neighbourhood below keenly, he put a hand to his lips and whistled, a low but penetrating sound. In response, as he watched, first one, then three, then a dozen, and at last twenty men, young like himself, most clad in black, some with blood-red, green or azure cowls or hats, all with swords and daggers at their belts, emerged from dark streets and archways into the square. The gang of dangerous-looking youths fanned out, a cocky assuredness in their movements.

The young man looked down at the eager faces, pale in the moonlight, gazing up at him. He raised his fist above his head in a defiant salute.

'We stand together!' he cried, as they too raised their

fists, some drawing their weapons and brandishing them, and cheered: 'Together!'

The young man quickly climbed, catlike, down the unfinished façade from the roof to the church's portico, and from it leapt, cloak flying, to land in a crouch, safely in their midst. They gathered round, expectantly.

'Silence, my friends!' He held up a hand to arrest a last, lone shout. He smiled grimly. 'Do you know why I called you, my closest allies, here tonight? To ask your aid. For too long I have been silent while our enemy, you know who I mean, Vieri de' Pazzi, has gone about this town slandering my family, dragging our name in the mud, and trying in his pathetic way to demean us. Normally I would not stoop to kicking such a mangy cur, but —'

He was interrupted as a large, jagged rock, hurled from the direction of the bridge, landed at his feet.

'Enough of your nonsense, *grullo*,' a voice called.

The young man turned as one with his group in the direction of the voice. Already he knew who it belonged to. Crossing the bridge from the south side another gang of young men was approaching. Its leader swaggered at its head, a red cloak, held by a clasp bearing a device of golden dolphins and crosses on a blue ground, over his dark velvet suit, his hand on the pommel of his sword. He was a passably handsome man, his looks marred by a cruel mouth and a weak chin, and though he was a little fat, there was no doubting the power in his arms and legs.

‘*Buona sera, Vieri,*’ the young man said evenly. ‘We were just talking about you.’ And he bowed with exaggerated courtesy, while assuming a look of surprise. ‘But you must forgive me. We were not expecting you personally. I thought the Pazzi always hired others to do their dirty work.’

Vieri, coming close, drew himself up as he and his troop came to a halt a few yards away. ‘Ezio Auditore! You pampered little whelp! I’d say it was rather your family of penpushers and accountants that goes running to the guards whenever there’s the faintest sign of trouble. *Codardo!*’ He gripped the hilt of his sword. ‘Afraid to handle things yourself, I’d say.’

‘Well, what can I say, Vieri, *ciccione*. Last time I saw her, your sister Viola seemed quite satisfied with the handling I gave *her*.’ Ezio Auditore gave his enemy a broad grin, content to hear his companions snigger and cheer behind him.

But he knew he’d gone too far. Vieri had already turned purple with rage. ‘That’s quite enough from you, Ezio, you little prick! Let’s see if you fight as well as you gabble!’ He turned his head back to his men, raising his sword. ‘Kill the bastards!’ he bellowed.

At once another rock whirled through the air, but this time it wasn’t thrown as a challenge. It caught Ezio a glancing blow on the forehead, breaking the skin and drawing blood. Ezio staggered back momentarily, as a hail of rocks flew from the hands of Vieri’s followers.

His own men barely had time to rally before the Pazzi gang was upon them, rushing over the bridge to Ezio and his men. All at once, the fighting was so close and so fast that there was hardly time at first to draw swords or even daggers, so the two gangs just went at each other with their fists.

The battle was hard and grim – brutal kicks and punches connected with the sickening sound of crunching bone. For a while it could have gone either way, then Ezio, his vision slightly impaired by the flow of blood from his forehead, saw two of his best men stumble and go down, to be trampled on by Pazzi thugs. Vieri laughed, and, close to Ezio, swung another blow at his head, his hand grasping a heavy stone. Ezio dropped to his haunches and the blow went wide, but it had been too close for comfort, and now the Auditore faction was getting the worst of it. Ezio did manage, before he could rise to his feet, to wrestle his dagger free and slice wildly but successfully at the thigh of a heavily built Pazzi thug who was bearing down at him with sword and dagger unsheathed. Ezio's dagger tore through fabric and into muscle and sinew, and the man let loose an agonized howl and went over, dropping his weapons and clutching at his wound with both hands as the blood belched forth.

Scrambling desperately to his feet, Ezio looked round. He could see that the Pazzi had all but surrounded his own men, penning them in against one wall of the

church. Feeling some of the strength returning to his legs, he made his way towards his fellows. Ducking under the scything blade of another Pazzi henchman, he managed to connect his fist to the man's stubbly jaw and had the satisfaction of seeing teeth fly and his would-be assailant fall to his knees, stunned by the blow. He yelled to his own men to encourage them, but in truth his thoughts were turning to ways of beating a retreat with as much dignity as possible, when above the noise of the fight he heard a loud, jovial and very familiar voice calling to him from behind the Pazzi mob.

'Hey, *fratellino*, what the hell are you up to?'

Ezio's heart pounded with relief, and he managed to gasp, 'Hey, Federico! What are you doing here? I thought you'd be out on the tiles as usual!'

'Nonsense! I knew you had something planned, and I thought I'd come along to see if my little brother had finally learned how to look after himself. But maybe you need another lesson or two!'

Federico Auditore, a few years Ezio's senior and the oldest of the Auditore siblings, was a big man with a big appetite – for drink, for love and for battle. He waded in even as he was speaking, knocking two Pazzi heads together and bringing his foot up to connect with the jaw of a third as he strode through the throng to stand side by side with his brother, seeming impervious to the violence that surrounded him. Around them their own men, encouraged, redoubled their efforts. The

Pazzi on the other hand were discomfited. A few of the dockyard hands had gathered at a safe distance to watch, and in the half-light the Pazzi mistook them for Auditore reinforcements. That and Federico's roars and flying fists, his actions quickly emulated by Ezio, who learnt fast, very quickly panicked them.

Vieri de' Pazzi's furious voice rose above the general tumult. 'Fall back!' he called to his men, his voice broken with exertion and anger. He caught Ezio's eye and snarled some inaudible threat before disappearing into the darkness, back across the Ponte Vecchio, followed by those of his men who could still walk, and hotly pursued by Ezio's now triumphant allies.

Ezio was about to follow suit, but his brother's meaty hand restrained him. 'Just a minute,' he said.

'What do you mean? We've got them on the run!'

'Steady on.' Federico was frowning, gently touching the wound on Ezio's brow.

'It's just a scratch.'

'It's more than that,' his brother decided, a grave expression on his face. 'We'd better get you to a doctor.'

Ezio spat. 'I haven't got time to waste running to doctors. Besides . . .' He paused ruefully. 'I haven't any money.'

'Hah! Wasted it on women and wine, I suppose.' Federico grinned, and slapped his younger brother warmly on the shoulder.

'Not wasted exactly, I'd say. And look at the example

you set me.’ Ezio grinned but then hesitated. He suddenly became aware that his head was thumping. ‘Still, it wouldn’t hurt to get it checked out. I suppose you couldn’t see your way to lending me a few *fiorini*?’

Federico patted his purse. It didn’t jingle. ‘Fact is, I’m a bit short myself just now,’ he said.

Ezio grinned at his brother’s sheepishness. ‘And what have you wasted yours on? Masses and Indulgences, I suppose?’

Federico laughed. ‘All right. I take your point.’ He looked around. In the end, only three or four of their own people had been hurt badly enough to remain on the field of battle, and they were sitting up, groaning a bit, but grinning too. It had been a tough set-to, but no one had broken any bones. On the other hand, a good half-dozen Pazzi henchmen lay completely out for the count, and one or two of them at least were expensively dressed.

‘Let’s see if our fallen enemies have any riches to share,’ Federico suggested. ‘After all, our need is greater than theirs, and I’ll bet you can’t lighten their load without waking them up!’

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Ezio, and set about it with some success. Before a few minutes had elapsed, he’d harvested enough gold coins to fill both their own purses. Ezio looked over to his brother triumphantly and jingled his newly claimed wealth to emphasize the point.

‘Enough!’ cried Federico. ‘Better leave them a bit to

limp home on. After all, we're not thieves – this is just the spoils of war. And I still don't like the look of that wound. We must get it seen to double quick.'

Ezio nodded, and turned to survey the field of the Auditore victory one last time. Losing patience, Federico rested a hand on his younger brother's shoulder. 'Come on,' he said, and without more ado he set off at such a pace that the battle-weary Ezio found it hard to keep up, though when he fell too far behind, or took a wrong turn down an alley, Federico would hold up, or hurry back to put him right. 'I'm sorry, Ezio. I just want us to get to the *medico* as soon as we can.'

And indeed it wasn't far, but Ezio was tiring by the minute. Finally they reached the shadowy room, festooned with mysterious instruments and phials of brass and glass, ranged along dark oak tables and hanging from the ceiling along with clusters of dried herbs, where their family doctor had his surgery. It was all Ezio could do to remain on his feet.

Dottore Ceresa was not best pleased at being roused in the middle of the night, but his manner changed to one of concern as soon as he had brought a candle close enough to inspect Ezio's wound in detail. 'Hmnm,' he said gravely. 'You've made quite a mess of yourself this time, young man. Can't you people think of anything better to do than go around beating each other up?'

'It was a question of honour, good doctor,' put in Federico.

‘I see,’ said the doctor, evenly.

‘It’s really nothing,’ said Ezio, though he felt faint.

Federico, as usual hiding concern behind humour, said, ‘Do patch him up as best you can, friend. That pretty little face of his is his only asset.’

‘Hey, *fottiti!*’ Ezio hit back, giving his brother the finger.

The doctor ignored them, washed his hands, probed the wound gently, and poured some clear fluid from one of his many bottles on to a piece of linen. He dabbed the wound with this and it stung so much that Ezio almost sprang from his chair, his face screwed up with the pain. Then, satisfied that the wound was clean, the doctor took a needle and threaded it with fine catgut.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘This really will hurt, a little.’

Once the stitches were in and the wound bandaged so that Ezio looked like a turbaned Turk, the doctor smiled encouragement. ‘That’ll be three *fiorini*, for now. I’ll come to your palazzo in a few days and remove the stitches. That’ll be another three *fiorini* to pay then. You’ll have a terrible headache, but it’ll pass. Just try to rest – if it’s in your nature! And don’t worry: the wound looks worse than it is, and there’s even a bonus: there shouldn’t be much of a scar, so you won’t be disappointing the ladies too greatly in future!’

Once they were back in the street, Federico put his arm round his younger brother. He pulled out a flask and offered it to Ezio. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, noticing

the expression on Ezio's face. 'It's our father's best grappa. Better than mother's milk for a man in your condition.'

They both drank, feeling the fiery liquid warm them. 'Quite a night,' said Federico.

'Indeed. I only wish they were all as much fun as –' but Ezio interrupted himself as he saw that his brother was beginning to grin from ear to ear. 'Oh, wait!' he corrected himself, laughing: 'They are!'

'Even so, I think a little food and drink wouldn't be a bad thing to set you up before we go home,' said Federico. 'It's late, I know, but there's a taverna nearby where they don't close until breakfast time and –'

'– you and the *oste* are *amici intimi*?'

'How did you guess?'

An hour or so later, after a meal of *ribollita* and *bistecca* washed down with a bottle of Brunello, Ezio felt as if he'd never been wounded at all. He was young and fit, and felt that all his lost energy had flowed back into him. The adrenaline of the victory over the Pazzi mob certainly contributed to the swiftness of his recovery.

'Time to go home, little brother,' said Federico. 'Father's sure to be wondering where we are, and you're the one he looks to to help him with the bank. Luckily for me, I've no head for figures, which is why I suppose he can't wait to get me into politics!'

'Politics or the circus – the way you carry on.'

'What's the difference?'

Ezio knew that Federico bore him no ill will over the fact that their father confided more of the family business in him than in his elder brother. Federico would die of boredom if confronted by a life in banking. The problem was, Ezio had a feeling that he might be the same. But for the moment, the day when he donned the black velvet suit and the gold chain of a Florentine banker was still some way off, and he was determined to enjoy his days of freedom and irresponsibility to the full. Little did he realize just how short-lived those days would be.

‘We’d better hurry, too,’ Federico was saying, ‘if we want to avoid a bollocking.’

‘He may be worried.’

‘No – he knows we can take care of ourselves.’ Federico was looking at Ezio speculatively. ‘But we *had* better get a move on.’ He paused. ‘You don’t feel up to a little wager at all, do you? A race perhaps?’

‘Where to?’

‘Let’s say,’ Federico looked across the moonlit city towards a tower not far away. ‘The roof of Santa Trinità. If it’s not going to take too much out of you – and it’s not far from home. But there’s just one thing more.’

‘Yes?’

‘We’re not racing along the streets, but across the rooftops.’

Ezio took a deep breath. ‘OK. Try me,’ he said.

‘All right, little *tartaruga* – go!’

Without another word, Federico was off, scaling a nearby roughcast wall as easily as a lizard would. He paused at the top, seeming almost to teeter among the rounded red tiles, laughed, and was off again. By the time Ezio had reached the rooftops, his brother was twenty yards ahead. He set off in pursuit, his pain forgotten in the adrenaline-fuelled excitement of the chase. Then he saw Federico take an almighty leap across a pitch-black void, to land lightly on the flat roof of a grey palazzo slightly below the level of the one he had jumped from. He ran a little way further, and waited. Ezio felt a glimmer of fear as the chasm of the street eight storeys below loomed before him, but he knew that he would die rather than hesitate in front of his brother, and so, summoning up his courage, he took a massive leap of faith, seeing, as he soared across, the hard granite cobbles in the moonlight far beneath his feet as they flailed the air. For a split second he wondered if he'd judged it right, as the hard grey wall of the palazzo seemed to rise up to meet him, but then, somehow, it sank below him and he was on the new roof, sprawling slightly it was true, but still on his feet, and elated, though breathing hard.

'Baby brother still has much to learn,' taunted Federico, setting off again, a darting shadow among the chimney-stacks under the scattering of clouds. Ezio hurled himself forward, lost in the wildness of the moment. Other abysses yawned beneath him, some

defining mere alleyways, others broad thoroughfares. Federico was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly the tower of Santa Trinità rose before him, rising from the red sweep of the church's gently sloping roof. But as he approached he remembered that the church stood in the centre of a square, and that the distance between its roof and those of the surrounding buildings was far greater than any he had yet leapt. He dared not hesitate or lose speed now – his only hope was that the church roof was lower than the one he would have to jump from. If he could throw himself forward with enough force, and truly launch himself into the air, gravity would do the rest. For one or two seconds he would fly like a bird. He forced any thought of the consequences of failure out of his mind.

The edge of the roof he was on approached fast, and then – nothing. He soared, listening to the air whistle in his ears, bringing tears into his eyes. The church roof seemed an infinite distance away – he would never reach it, he would never laugh or fight or hold a woman in his arms again. He couldn't breathe. He shut his eyes, and then . . .

His body bent double, he was steadying himself with his hands and feet, but they were supported again – he had made it, within inches of the edge, but he had made it on to the church roof!

But where was Federico? He clambered up to the base of the tower and turned to look back the way he

had come, just in time to see his brother flying through the air himself. Federico landed firmly, but his weight sent one or two of the red clay tiles slithering out of place and he almost lost his footing as the tiles slid down the roof and off the edge, shattering a few seconds later on the hard cobbles far below. But Federico had found his balance again, and he stood up, panting for sure, but with a broad, proud smile on his face.

‘Not such a *tartaruga* after all,’ he said, as he came up and clapped Ezio on the shoulder. ‘You went past me like greased lightning.’

‘I didn’t even know that I had,’ said Ezio briefly, trying to catch his breath.

‘Well, you won’t beat me up to the top of the tower,’ retorted Federico, pushing Ezio to the side, and he started to clamber up the squat tower which the city fathers were thinking of replacing with something of a more modern design. This time Federico made it first, and even had to give a hand up to his wounded brother, who was beginning to feel that bed would be no bad thing. They were both out of breath, and stood while they recovered to look out over their city, serene and silent in the oyster-light of dawn.

‘It is a good life we lead, brother,’ said Federico with uncharacteristic solemnity.

‘The best,’ Ezio agreed. ‘And may it never change.’

They both paused – neither wishing to break the perfection of the moment – but after a while Federico

quietly spoke. 'May it never change us either, *fratellino*. Come, we must get back. There is the roof of our palazzo. Pray God Father hasn't stayed up all night, or we really will be for it. Let's go.'

He made for the edge of the tower in order to climb back down to the roof, but stopped when he saw that Ezio had remained where he was. 'What is it?'

'Wait a minute.'

'What are you looking at?' asked Federico, rejoining him. He followed Ezio's gaze and then his face broke out into a grin. 'You sly devil! You're not thinking of going there now, are you? Let the poor girl sleep!'

'No – I think it's time Cristina woke up.'

Ezio had met Cristina Calfucci only a short time before, but already they seemed inseparable, despite the fact that their parents still deemed them too young to form a serious alliance. Ezio disagreed, but Cristina was only seventeen and her parents expected Ezio to rein in his wild habits before they would even begin to look more kindly on him. Of course, this only served to make him more impetuous.

Federico and he had been lounging in the main market after buying some trinkets for their sister's Saint's Day, watching the pretty girls of the town with their *accompagnatrice* as they flitted from stall to stall, examining lace here, ribbons and bolts of silk there. But one girl had stood out from her companions, more

beautiful and graceful than anyone Ezio had ever seen before. Ezio would never forget that day, the day on which he had first set eyes on her.

‘Oh,’ he had gasped involuntarily. ‘Look! She’s so beautiful.’

‘Well,’ said his ever-practical brother. ‘Why don’t you go over and say hello?’

‘What?’ Ezio was shocked. ‘And after I’ve said hello – what then?’

‘Well, you could try talking to her. What you’ve bought, what she’s bought – it doesn’t matter. You see, little brother, most men are so afraid of beautiful girls that anyone who actually plucks up the courage to have a chat stands at an immediate advantage. What? You think they don’t *want* to be noticed, they don’t *want* to enjoy a little conversation with a man? Of course they do! Anyway, you’re not bad-looking, and you *are* an Auditore. So go for it – and I’ll distract the chaperone. Come to think of it, she’s not so bad-looking herself.’

Ezio remembered how, left alone with Cristina, rooted to the spot, at a loss for words, drinking in the beauty of her dark eyes, her long, soft auburn hair, her tip-tilted nose . . .

She stared at him. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘What d’you mean?’ he blurted out.

‘Why are you just standing there?’

‘Oh . . . erhm . . . because I wanted to ask you something.’

‘And what might that be?’

‘What’s your name?’

She rolled her eyes. Damn, he thought, she’s heard it all before. ‘Not one you’ll ever need to make use of,’ she said. And off she went. Ezio stared after her for a moment, then set off after her.

‘Wait!’ he said, catching up, more breathless than if he’d run a mile. ‘I wasn’t ready. I was planning on being really charming. And suave! And witty! Won’t you give me a second chance?’

She looked back at him without breaking her stride, but she did give him the faintest trace of a smile. Ezio had been in despair, but Federico had been watching and called to him softly: ‘Don’t give up now! I saw her smile at you! She’ll remember you.’

Taking heart, Ezio had followed her – discreetly, taking care she wouldn’t notice. Three or four times he had to dart behind a market stall, or, after she had left the square, duck into a doorway, but he’d managed to tail her pretty successfully right up to the door of her family mansion, where a man he recognized had blocked her path. Ezio had drawn back.

Cristina looked at the man angrily. ‘I’ve told you before, Vieri, I’m not interested in you. Now, let me pass.’

Ezio, concealed, drew in a breath. Vieri de’ Pazzi! Of course!

‘But *signorina*, I am interested. Very interested indeed,’ said Vieri.

‘Then join the queue.’

She tried to get past him, but he moved in front of her. ‘I don’t think so, *amore mio*. I’ve decided that I’m tired of waiting for you to open your legs of your own volition.’ And he seized her roughly by the arm, drawing her close, putting his other arm round her as she struggled to get free.

‘I’m not sure you’re getting the message,’ said Ezio suddenly, stepping forward and looking Vieri in the eye.

‘Ah, the little Auditore whelp. *Cane rognoso!* What the hell do you have to do with this? To the devil with you.’

‘And *buon’ giorno* to you too, Vieri. I’m so sorry to intrude, but I have the distinct impression that you’re spoiling this young lady’s day.’

‘Oh, you do, do you? Excuse me, my dearest, while I kick the stuffing out of this parvenu.’ With that, Vieri had thrust Cristina aside and lunged at Ezio with his right fist. Ezio parried easily and stepped aside, tripping Vieri as the momentum of his attack carried him forward, sending him sprawling in the dust.

‘Had enough, friend?’ said Ezio mockingly. But Vieri was on his feet in an instant, and came towards him in a rage, fists flailing. He’d got one hard blow in to the side of Ezio’s jaw, but Ezio warded off a left hook and got two of his own in, one to the stomach and, as Vieri bent double, another to his jaw. Ezio had turned to Cristina to check that she was all right. Winded, Vieri backed off, but his hand flew to his dagger. Cristina saw

the movement and gave an involuntary cry of alarm as Vieri brought the dagger plunging down towards Ezio's back, but, warned by the cry, Ezio had turned in the nick of time and seized Vieri firmly by the wrist, wrenching the dagger away from him. It fell to the ground. The two young men stood face to face, breathing hard.

'Is that the best you can do?' Ezio said through gritted teeth.

'Shut your mouth or by God I'll kill you!'

Ezio laughed. 'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you trying to force yourself on a nice girl who clearly thinks you're a complete ball of dung – given the way your pappa tries to force his banking interests on Florence!'

'You fool! It's your father who needs to be taught a lesson in humility!'

'It's time you Pazzi stopped slandering us. But then, you're all mouth and no fist.'

Vieri's lip was bleeding badly. He wiped it with his sleeve. 'You'll pay for this – you and your whole breed. I won't forget this, Auditore!' He spat at Ezio's feet, stooped to retrieve his dagger, then turned, and ran. Ezio had watched him go.

He remembered all this, standing there on the church tower and looking across at Cristina's house. He remembered the elation he'd felt as he'd turned back

to Cristina and seen a new warmth in her eyes as she'd thanked him.

'Are you all right, *signorina*?' he'd said.

'I am now – thanks to you.' She'd hesitated, her voice still trembling with fear. 'You asked me my name – well, it's Cristina. Cristina Calfucci.'

Ezio bowed. 'I am honoured to meet you, Signorina Cristina. Ezio Auditore.'

'Do you know that man?'

'Vieri? Our paths have crossed now and then. But our families have no reason to like one another.'

'I never want to see him again.'

'If I can help it, you won't.'

She smiled shyly, then said, 'Ezio, you have my gratitude – and because of that, I am prepared to give you a second chance, after your bad start!' She laughed gently, then kissed him on the cheek before disappearing into her mansion.

The small crowd that had inevitably gathered had given Ezio a round of applause. He had bowed, smilingly, but as he'd turned away he'd known that he might have made a new friend, but he had also made an implacable enemy.

'Let Cristina sleep,' Federico said again, drawing Ezio back from his reverie.

'Time enough for that – later,' he replied. 'I must see her.'

'All right, if you must – I'll try to cover for you with

Father. But watch yourself – Vieri’s men may still be about.’ With that, Federico shinned down the tower to the roof, and bounded off that into a hay-wagon parked in the street which led home.

Ezio watched him go, then decided to emulate his brother. The hay-wain looked very far below him, but he remembered what he’d been taught, controlled his breathing, calmed himself, and concentrated.

Then he flew into the air, taking the greatest leap of his life so far. For an instant he thought he might have misjudged his aim, but he calmed his own momentary panic and landed safely in the hay. A true leap of faith! A little breathless, but exhilarated at his success, Ezio swung himself into the street.

The sun was just appearing over the eastern hills but there were still very few people about. Ezio was just about to start off in the direction of Cristina’s mansion when he heard echoing footsteps and, desperately trying to conceal himself, he shrank into the shadows of the church porch and held his breath. It was none other than Vieri and two of the Pazzi guards who rounded the corner.

‘We’d better give up, chief,’ said the senior guard. ‘They’ve long gone by now.’

‘I know they’re here somewhere,’ snapped Vieri. ‘I can practically smell them.’ He and his men made a circuit of the church square but showed no sign of moving on. The sunlight was shrinking the shadows.

Ezio cautiously crept into the shelter of the hay again and lay there for what seemed an age, impatient to be on his way. Once, Vieri passed so close that Ezio could practically smell *him*, but at last he motioned his men with an angry gesture to move on. Ezio lay still for a while longer, then climbed down and let out a long sigh of relief. He dusted himself off, and quickly covered the short distance that separated him from Cristina, praying that no one in her household would yet be stirring.

The mansion was still silent, though Ezio guessed that servants would be preparing the kitchen fires at the back. He knew which Cristina's window was, and threw a handful of gravel up at her shutters. The noise seemed deafening and he waited, heart in mouth. Then the shutters opened and she appeared on the balcony. Her nightdress revealed the delicious contours of her body as he gazed up at her. He was at once lost in desire.

'Who is it?' she called softly.

He stood back so she could see him. 'Me!'

Cristina sighed, though in a not unfriendly way. 'Ezio! I might have known.'

'May I come up, *mia colomba*?'

She glanced over her shoulder before answering in a whisper. 'All right. But just for a minute.'

'That's all I need.'

She grinned. 'Indeed?'

He was confused. 'No – sorry – I didn't mean it quite like that! Let me show you . . .' Looking round himself

to make sure the street was still deserted, he gained a foothold in one of the large iron rings set into the grey stonework of the house for tethering horses, and hoisted himself up, finding relatively easy handholds and footholds in the rusticated masonry. In two winks of an eye he had hoisted himself over the balustrade and she was in his arms.

‘Oh, Ezio!’ she sighed as they kissed. ‘Look at your head. What have you been doing this time?’

‘It’s nothing. A scratch.’ Ezio paused, smiling. ‘Perhaps now I’m up, I could also come in?’ he said gently.

‘Where?’

He was all innocence. ‘To your bedchamber, of course.’

‘Well, perhaps – if you’re sure a minute is all you need . . .’

Their arms around each other, they went through the double doors into the warm light of Cristina’s room.

An hour later, they were awakened by the sunlight streaming in through the windows, the bustling noises of carts and people in the street, and – worst of all – the sound of Cristina’s father’s voice as he opened the bedroom door.

‘Cristina,’ he was saying. ‘Time to get up, girl! Your tutor will be here at any – What the devil? Son of a bitch!’

Ezio kissed Cristina, quickly but hard. ‘Time to go, I think,’ he said, seizing his clothes and darting to the window. He shinned down the wall and was already pulling on his suit when Antonio Calfucci appeared on the balcony above. He was in a white rage.

‘*Perdonate, Messere*,’ Ezio offered.

‘I’ll give you *perdonate, Messere*,’ yelled Calfucci. ‘Guards! Guards! Get after that *cimice*! Bring me his head! And I want his *coglioni* as well!’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry –’ Ezio began, but already the gates of the mansion were opening and the Calfucci bodyguards came rushing out, swords drawn. Now more or less dressed, Ezio set off at a run down the street, dodging wagons and pushing past citizens on his way, wealthy businessmen in solemn black, merchants in browns and reds, humbler folk in homespun tunics and, once, a church procession which he collided with so unexpectedly that he all but tipped over the statue of the Virgin the black-cowled monks were carrying. At last, after ducking down alleys and leaping over walls, he stopped and listened. Silence. Not even the shouts and curses that had followed him from the general population could be heard any more. As for the guards, he’d shaken them off, he was sure of that.

He only hoped Signor Calfucci hadn’t recognized him. Cristina wouldn’t betray him, he could be sure of that. Besides, she could run rings round her father, who adored her. And even if he did find out, Ezio reflected,

he wouldn't be a bad match. His father ran one of the biggest banking houses in town, and one day it might be bigger than that of the Pazzi or even – who knew? – of the Medici.

Using back streets, he made his way home. The first to meet him was Federico, who looked at him gravely and shook his head ominously. 'You're in for it now,' he said. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'