

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aeb' in a white, elegant, cursive script font, positioned centrally within a solid black rectangular background.

THE PHOENIX OF
FLORENCE

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Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2019.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

HB ISBN 978-0-7490-2213-6
TPB ISBN 978-0-7490-2480-2

Typeset in 12/18 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd

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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHAPTER ONE

When Sergeant Andrea Gherardi started banging on my door that night in August, I was asleep. It might be more precise to say that I was negotiating one of the hazy and feverish realms between true sleep and wakefulness, because the stifling air of a Florentine summer night had not let anyone in the city sleep properly for days, and my rank as one of the Grand Duke's police officers did not exempt me from the common suffering. I rolled and kicked at the damp sheets, sometimes dimly aware, sometimes trapped inside shallow dreams like a fly caught in the filmy surface of a puddle. The dreams were the usual ones: palimpsests of memory, scraped

off and redrawn, rubbed away and drawn again, line by line into the same dull scene, made up of things I recognised but knew had never happened. A country road, a common track of chalk and dust, climbing steadily up a smooth, brown hillside. On the other side, a town with a market, and my father waiting for me. But the track never reached the skyline. The crown of the hill receded imperceptibly. I stopped to drink at a fountain, and when I looked up, the track was running through fields, or a vineyard. The sun slipped from zenith to dusk. My father was waiting.

I turned and, finding a miraculous little patch of cool linen, groaned with pleasure. The landscape changed. A copse of holm oaks hiding a spring, water dripping over emerald moss. I was leading a horse, who dipped its head to drink. Flies hummed like a plucked lute string. Above the dream, in the thick night, a thread of breeze trailed in through the window and brushed across my damp skin. I stretched and let myself surrender to the flickering shadows of the leaves.

At first I thought it was my own heart that had woken me, thumping so hard that I could hear it. I rolled onto my back, unpleasantly alert. The inner workings of my body were something that, for as long as I could remember, I had regarded with unease. Every soldier knows that the body of a man is nothing but meat, and that whatever animates it is not only invisible but fickle. I had seen men die from scratches no worse than a shaving cut. On the other hand, people I knew had survived the loss of arms, legs, even, once, a sizeable chunk of skull. I'd seen men clutch their chests and fall off their horses, stone dead, killed by their own hearts. So I felt a brief surge of relief when I realised that the knocking was coming from the outer door of the house and not from under my ribs. Relief which faded when I heard a familiar voice.

‘Comandante! Are you there? Comandante?’

‘For God’s sake . . .’ I pressed my thumbs against my eyelids and sat up, muttering. The knocking continued. ‘Be quiet, Andrea!’ I rasped. The calling and knocking did not relent. I staggered upright. ‘Sergente Gherardi!’ I called, louder, wincing as my voice cracked. ‘Shut up! You’ll wake the whole street!’

Even though the heat was almost unbearable, I had slept in a linen shirt. Cursing, I tightened the laces and tied them with a savage tug. My undergarments and stockings were folded on a nearby chair. I pulled them on. Toes groped for slippers. Despite the closeness, I swung my cape, the long black broadcloth one I used for night work, around my body. Gherardi was still hammering away as I stamped downstairs, crossed the courtyard and unlatched the street door.

‘What is it that couldn’t have kept until morning, Andrea?’ I croaked, as the large man stepped into the courtyard. Andrea Gherardi of the *sbirri* of Florence grinned and planted two meaty fists on his hips. He was sweating in thick beads and his dark clothes were soaked through at the chest and under the arms.

‘Guess who’s got himself killed, Comandante?’ he asked, when we were both inside. His chest was heaving, I noticed, as if he’d run here.

‘Tell me you didn’t wake me up to play games.’

Andrea laughed. ‘There’s been fun and games, all right.’

‘Oh, just fucking tell me, Andrea,’ I snapped.

The big man pouted in mock disappointment. Then he brightened. ‘You’d have guessed it in three goes or less, Comandante. Pietro Vennini!’

‘Vennini?’ I frowned. Part of my mind was still watching the light dance on that cool, green spring water. Then it cleared. ‘Ah. Yes, I

would have guessed that, you're right. He didn't just die, I suppose? Someone killed him?'

'*Cazzo*, Comandante! Someone? The bastard was cut to sausage meat by a whole gang. Right on Ponte Santa Trinita.'

I sighed and dragged my fingers through my damp hair. 'When?'

'About half an hour ago. Haven't seen anything like it for a while. The bridge looks like a slaughterhouse. There're two other stiff's apart from Vennini.'

'You can stop smiling, Andrea. Three people dead?'

'Oh, come on, Comandante. We all know that Pietro had it coming to him. The whole of Florence knew it.'

I sighed. 'Let me get dressed. Who's there at the bridge?'

'Tedesco and Gualdi.'

'Just two men?'

'I sent word to the Bargello before I came here.' The sergeant paused and scratched his nose, glancing slyly at me. 'I was going to get the *capo*, but . . .'

I sighed. 'You did the right thing. Scarfa wouldn't have appreciated it in the slightest. Not that I do, mind.'

'That's what I thought. He'd be like a bear in winter. Make our lives a misery for the next month.' The sergeant folded his arms.

'Can I get dressed, please, Andrea?' I said pointedly.

'Go ahead.' The sergeant looked at the nearest chair, obviously planning to make himself comfortable.

'Jesus . . .'

I growled in frustration. 'There's a jug of beer in the pantry. It should still be cool. Please, go and help yourself.'

The sergeant grinned and rolled off in the direction of my outstretched finger. When he was out of the room, I went up to my bedroom and locked the door. I was buttoning my black doublet

when I heard Gherardi stamping up the stairs. I unlocked the door as quietly as I could and met him on the landing.

‘Was the beer cool?’ I asked, taking down the lantern I used for night business from its hook near the door.

‘Nah. Warm as piss.’ Gherardi blinked as he remembered who he was talking to. ‘But most welcome, Comandante. Most welcome indeed. Here . . .’ He took the candle from his own lantern and lit mine with it. ‘Yes, most welcome. It’s going to be a long night.’

We didn’t have far to walk. My house was in Borgo Ognissanti, just past the hospital of Santa Maria dell’Umiltà, the orphanage which everyone knew as the Pietà. As soon as we crossed in front of the Palazzo Ricassoli and turned onto Lungarno Corsini, I saw the glow of torchlight just ahead. There was an excited buzz of voices as well.

‘Quite a crowd,’ I said to Gherardi. ‘Tedesco and Gualdi should have sent them off to their beds.’

‘Everyone’s a bit worked up,’ he answered. ‘The heat and everything. And Vennini was popular.’

The two policemen had managed to keep the crowd, which was a good fifty or sixty strong, off the bridge itself. Gherardi walked straight into the throng, big elbows hammering left and right, and I followed him. In the torchlight, the faces around me drifted in and out of shadow and focus. Working men, mostly: weavers and dyers, my neighbours from Borgo Ognissanti and the streets round about, their features stained and prematurely aged by poverty and hard labour. Closer to the bridge, Gherardi shoved past some better-dressed men and they rounded on him angrily, only to step back, muttering, when they saw he was wearing the livery of the police. I looked them up and down, running my eyes over faces, clothes and hands, but there was no blood

and they were sweating from the heat, not recent exertion. Tedesco, a recent recruit to the *sbirri*, was gripping the shaft of a halberd and his expression told me he was enjoying himself.

‘The first one’s here,’ Gherardi said, pointing. A long, dark shape was laid out at an angle across the pavement where the bridge started to rise over the first arch. I bent down and shone the beam of my lantern into the corpse’s face. A youngish man with dark, curly hair and extravagant mustachios; his light brown eyes were still shining, and his lips were curved in a half-smile as if he’d just lowered himself into a warm bath. Blood had run from his nose and the corner of his mouth. I turned him over onto his back: his dark red doublet was stained even redder and was torn in at least three places. Dark liquid welled up through the rips as the cloth settled against his torso.

‘Recognise him?’ Gherardi shook his head. ‘Me neither. That’s a soldier’s moustache, though.’ I stood up, and a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd behind me. ‘Tell those idiots to go home,’ I said. ‘Tell them I’ll fetch the Lanzi if they give me any trouble.’

The threat of the Grand Duke’s German guards had the desired effect. With a lot more muttering, the crowd began to thin and then evaporate. I watched them drift away up Via de’ Tornabuoni or along the riverbanks. The workers would go home, the gentlemen would be heading for the brothels and gambling dens near the Mercato Vecchio. I sighed and walked over the curve of the bridge to where Gherardi was standing, holding his lantern over a man who was sitting against the parapet of the bridge, legs splayed out in front, chin bowed to his chest. He could have been a sleeping drunkard, but when I came forward and held my own light close, I saw that one limp arm was attached to the body by not much more than a laced doublet sleeve, and that the top of the man’s head was crushed like

the top of a boiled egg. Blood and brains plastered his hair to his face. I drew my dagger and lifted the sticky curtain aside.

‘Don’t know him,’ said Gherardi.

‘I do,’ I said. In spite of the deep slash that had almost taken off his nose, I recognised the pinched cheeks and long, narrow jaw. ‘He’s from Siena. I don’t remember his name, but he knew some friends of mine. He was a *sergente* in Scipio Piccolomini’s company in Flanders.’ I straightened up. ‘He’s in quite a state. Did Vennini kill both these fellows, or did he have friends with him?’

‘From what I can gather, it was just Vennini against six or seven attackers,’ said Gherardi. ‘Want to see him? Over here. He’s in a worse state than this poor sod. A lot worse.’

The third corpse was a dark heap in the shadows at the far end of the bridge. He had almost made it home. Pietro Vennini’s house was in Borgo San Jacopo, just around the next corner. The other policeman, Gualdi, was holding back another crowd, thirty or so faces, their grimaces licked by torchlight. Gherardi trotted over to them and began to shout the same threat he’d made just now, and again, the faces began to draw back and fade into the darkness. When they had mostly gone, I squatted down next to the dead man.

Vennini had been handsome. One of the most handsome men in Florence, depending on whom you asked. The face in the flickering light from my lantern was barely a face at all, though. He had been stabbed through one eye, and the left side, from ear to mouth, had been sliced clean away, exposing clenched teeth. There was another wound in his forehead that had punched clean through the skull, and his neck had been hacked down to the bone. Vennini had been wearing a doublet of defence, a jacket of quilted and ruched leather studded all over with ornamental strips of gilded steel, but even that

had been cut to pieces. One arm, hand still grasping the hilt of a sword, lay a little to one side. I looked back across the bridge. A trail of blood – drops and footprints, some distinct, others dragged and smeared – ran from the direction of Via de' Tornabuoni.

'He put up a proper fight,' I said.

Gherardi had come back and was standing over me. 'That he did,' he said. 'Two dead, and judging by the amount of gravy, a few more seriously damaged.'

I stood up, imagining what had happened. He'd have been wounded further over the bridge but had kept his attackers at bay as he retreated. The temptation to turn tail and run for the safety of his house must have been overwhelming, but he'd resisted it. Or perhaps he couldn't run. I stooped to have another look, wrinkling my nose at the smell of blood already starting to turn foetid in the heat. Yes, there was a deep gash in his left thigh. He would have been gushing blood. He'd stopped here, then, and made his last stand. The wounds to his face and neck had been made while he was still upright, but the others . . . I narrowed my eyes, seeing blades rising and falling, hacking at the fallen man.

'This wasn't just a brawl,' I said. 'Those two were soldiers. Who wanted him dead?'

'Comandante!' Gherardi chuckled. 'Only half the husbands in Florence.'

Vennini's stock-in-trade had been the seduction of women of noble or gentle birth, young women harnessed to older men for the furthering of bloodlines and fortunes. Usually the cuckolded husbands kept quiet, fearing shame and laughter, but a few years ago one of them had challenged Vennini to a duel and got himself killed, for which crime Vennini had been exiled. He had been back for almost a year, having

done some favour for the Grand Duke in Rome. Pietro Vennini had a few important friends, being from one of those Florentine families that had been here for ever, but the Venninis hadn't been anywhere near power in the city since before Old Cosimo's time. This death wouldn't ruffle many feathers: far more people would rejoice than would mourn. But something wasn't right. Supposing the two dead attackers were part of a bigger gang of soldiers for hire, and Vennini hadn't simply crossed them in some tavern or brothel, someone had paid to have him cut to pieces very publicly.

'Who was he screwing?' I asked Gherardi.

'Who wasn't he screwing?' The sergeant made a face and pumped his fist back and forth.

'For God's sake . . .' I rubbed at the scar on my neck. My throat was starting to feel tight. Soon my voice would fail altogether. 'Find out. I want to know first thing in the morning. And names: those two over there, and whoever else might have been here. I want witnesses.'

'Yes, Comandante,' said Gherardi, his buoyant mood evidently punctured.

'Get on with it. I'm going back to bed,' I told him, and started off towards the north bank. The smell coming up from the river, which was very low and running sluggishly between festering, muddy strands, was catching in my throat. As I passed, I looked down at the man from Siena. His name was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't catch it. I remembered him more clearly now, though. He'd been one of those men who make a nuisance of themselves when there is no fighting to be had, gambling and whoring around the taverns of Brussels. He'd fought one of my men – yes, that was right. I had been in charge of my company's security back then, and I'd had to complain to his *condottiere*, Piccolomini, a Sienese patrician who

had settled matters reluctantly and with a lot of well-bred flouncing. It wasn't particularly surprising that he'd washed up here in Florence. There were plenty of ex-mercenaries floating around Italy these days, now that the endless wars had actually come to an end. I yawned. This would be over in a couple of days. Vennini had slept with the wrong wife. As Gherardi said, it was bound to have happened sooner or later. It was a demonstration of power, and the man who had ordered it would not keep his involvement secret. He was probably already on his way to Milan or Rome, to save himself the bother of a trial, bribes and exile.

There was something else to all this, though, and I knew I wouldn't get back to sleep tonight. Vennini had no doubt been killed over some affair that had been discovered. But there are at least three parties to any affair: the wife, the lover and the cuckold. A cuckolded husband who had taken the trouble to murder his rival so very extravagantly had another person to deal with. As I walked past the hospital and the Casa della Pietà next door, where a hundred and fifty orphaned girls lived and worked, I knew that somewhere in Florence, a woman was waiting for her killers, or was already dead, and there was nothing I could do about it. A couple of cloaked figures slipped into an alley to avoid the beam of my lantern. I was the *sbirri*, the Grand Duke's police: the very sight of me made people afraid. Those two: coming or going from some gambling den. Or perhaps they were a pair of sodomites. Both those likelihoods put them under my jurisdiction. But I wasn't in the mood for any more excitement tonight. There would be enough of that in the morning, and morning wasn't very far away.

My bed was as damp and unwelcoming as when I had left it, and though I slipped into the shallowest of sleep, all it brought me

was the familiar phantoms. Soldiers' dreams, as thin and clinging as a bloody bandage. Here they came: the barber-surgeon's trembling hands forcing a needle and thread through my flesh; the clack of boot-soles on stone stairs; a horse, kicking with a broken leg, its great, soft brown eye begging for understanding. When I woke at dawn it was, as usual, a relief.