

© 2014 Roger Pepper

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system - except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews - without permission in writing from the publisher.

Davide is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## *Chapter 1*

**He couldn't wait** to see Michelangelo's famous statue of David in Florence. For the heck of it, he might bend the museum's rules and sneak a digital shot of his namesake. Although, he bore no resemblance to the massive sculpture, an effigy of the slingshot wielding David of biblical fame that stood eighteen feet high and had the physique of a Greek god. This David grew up to be short, dark and slender, had never slain Goliaths. As a professor at Harvard, studying the history of religions and war, his most significant achievement came from writing a work of nonfiction in which he'd felt compelled to compare today's extreme Muslims with medieval Christians.

At first, his book made ripples but these wavelets quickly grew into a tsunami of indignation. He shouldn't have published it, and risked the media branding him as a heartless academic that didn't care about people. Someone did need to examine the reasons behind the tragedy of killing in the name of religion, though. In the crusades, Christians and Muslims hacked at each other with swords and spears, and now the savagery raised its ugly head again in an era when weapons of mass destruction could kill millions. Yet he could have gone too far by identifying faith and belief as the source of conflict.

Yes, he did care a lot about people, and what became of them, and if he ever had the good fortune to marry, he'd want the world to be at peace, and have somewhere safe to bring up children. Peaceful would be a good description of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Assisi, the home of the patron saint of animals, the cluster of medieval buildings surrounded by a wall and spilling down the slope below.

Taking off his daypack, David sat on the grass. The view from this outlook high on Mount Subasio had to be more intoxicating than wine. Wonderful red tiled roofs in the Spoleto valley, emerald hued countryside divided into squares by roads, distant vineyards, stately cypress, clumps of mulberry trees and olive groves. The waves of blue and white flowers stretching across the mountainside were good to look at, too. All of Italy appeared to be in bloom.

His gaze wandered up to the sky and he watched swirls of pink and gold deepen to copper as the sun sank. As he watched, the clouds thickened and a solid black line formed on the horizon. Rain on the way, but he didn't have to run back down to Assisi, he had plenty of time.

The media spotlight had become too hot for him in Boston, he needed a break, and paying his Italian homeland a visit in late spring more than filled the bill. He'd succeeded in leaving reporters and his academic baggage behind and already enjoyed a week exploring the freethinking university town of Bologna where his parents were born. Then he flew south to Rome, spending several days immersed in classic art and culture. Now on the way back north through Umbria to Florence, he'd stopped in Assisi to satisfy his curiosity about Saint Francis.

A lark sang nearby in the grass, three swifts swooped around a bush fifty feet down the slope. He heard the swooshing sound of wings and ducked as a swift zoomed over him from behind, low enough to ruffle his hair. The bird banked left and then right in front of him, nature's miniature jet plane showing its stuff.

A beautiful scene, but he had a nagging sense that it wouldn't be beautiful much longer. His scalp prickled. His hair felt strange, as if standing on end. He thought he could smell a faint odor of something burning. Sulfur, burning sulfur and the smell kept growing stronger. Lightning?

As he leapt to his feet, an intense shaft of light lanced into his chest and thunder exploded around him.

Forces beyond his comprehension lifted him into the air, and he saw his body twenty feet below on flattened grass. The grass and his pack were on fire.

Sprawled back on Mt. Subasio, arms and legs flung out, his body showed no sign of movement. Not the slightest rise and fall of the chest, no sucking in and blowing out of air.

Lightning blasted a hole in the front of his T-shirt. He must be dead.

Mysterious mist began to swirl around his presence as he floated above his remains, and he seemed to drift up the creaky stairs to his office at Harvard. Everything looked the same as it did before he came to Italy. His glass jar of chocolate-coated coffee beans still sat on his desk. The twisted and broken paperclips that satisfied his nervous twitch clung together in their familiar heap. His best-selling book of nonfiction stood upright and open, where he'd balanced it on the desk, on edge.

Again, mist surrounded him. A spot of light appeared and he watched it grow bigger and brighter until it enveloped him. Incredible brilliance, eye-scorching white in which pinpoints sparkled like diamonds.

Lifeless. Suspended in strange isolation, he heard a soft voice whisper, "Go forth Davide, rebuild faith and belief, spread kindness for me." A female voice it seemed.

Air rushed past him from above as if a giant vacuum sucked him down to earth, plunging him into endless, clinging darkness.

Dim light filtered into his eyes, and he found himself lying on his back gaping at an angry sky.

He wasn't dead after all! He'd stared death in the face. Smoke drifted from the blackened hole in his shirt. Lightning melted his medical tag against his sternum. Being allergic to peanuts fried him.

His mouth tasted of battery acid. His ears kept ringing. He tried to shake off a deep, burning sensation in his chest, even his hair hurt. He spat out pieces of a shattered front tooth. His feet felt seared, so he forced his smarting eyeballs to look at his scorched sneakers.

David placed a finger over the hole in his shirt, feeling a round lump. A fused silver button embedded in the skin of his chest. He must get rid of it. He had to. Not knowing quite why,

or how, he ripped the lump out and hurled it into the grass, screaming and biting his tongue as he did it.

He'd sunk into utter madness, ripping a lump out of his chest, madness sparked by lightning and inflamed by a woman calling him Davide. He didn't know anyone named Davide. That confusing message couldn't have been for this David, not for David Bruno.

A raindrop as big as a cup of water splashed onto his forehead. Another smacked the palm of his right hand, spraying his fingers and wrist. Lightning lit the sky. Thunder rumbled.

The storm he'd seen in the distance couldn't have reached him this quickly, but somehow all hell had let loose. He had to get down now, go back to his hotel and safety.

The grass would soon be soaked and he'd be drenched, a recipe for certain death if he continued to hang around at four thousand feet in this thunderstorm. He wouldn't survive if lightning hit him again.

Nobody would be coming to help him. If he had a cell phone and managed to contact someone, it wouldn't be possible to climb Subasio in these conditions. They couldn't send a helicopter.

Teeth clenched, David rolled onto his side. He brought his knees up to his stinging chest and levered himself upright. Wobbling, he stood, but his legs buckled and he crashed facedown among some flowers.

That message could have come from the peculiar woman he saw just before he reached the outlook. He hadn't encountered the divine. Moreover, if it were that strange woman, he needed to remember that she didn't pass by with a wave or a smile. She stopped and peered at him with liquid blue, penetrating eyes.

He could also have suffered an illusion when the lightning struck. Recent scientific work on heart patients and animals showed that lack of oxygen caused by heart failure produces a pronounced surge in brain activity, especially in the visual cortex. The floating feeling he'd experienced, the apparition of brilliance and his imagining a woman talking could be the normal outcome of cardiac arrest.

Well, he'd gotten lucky and his heart somehow restarted. Now he'd get back on his feet, and keep struggling until he succeeded in standing upright. Pushing his hands into the grass, he raised his head and body a few inches. Then his arms gave out and he fell on his face again. He pictured Bruce and the Spider, the characters from a tale of old that he'd read in a history of Great Britain. Robert Bruce, King of Scotland, who saw how a spider kept trying to string a web from one wooden beam to another, a king who took a spider's courage to heart and never gave up.

More akin to a fool than a king, he wouldn't give in. If he couldn't walk, he'd crawl down to shelter. He thrust himself up, this time onto hands and knees. A wretched, uncoordinated animal, he started struggling down the mountainside through sodden grass.

Rain splashed off the back of his head, ran into his ringing ears, over his cheeks and dripped off his nose. Eyes flooded with raindrops, he inched his way down through a howling storm. He lost count of how many times he slumped on the grass and how many he dragged himself back onto all fours.

He might as well have been trying to crawl through a carwash.

Sheet lightning lit the sky as he scrambled down a steep incline. He slid and fell once more. His hands touched stones, fist sized stones in a curved line. Squinting, he could just make out a saucer shaped dip, about 150 feet wide at the grassy rim above. Stones arranged in the shape of a giant heart. On his way to the outlook, he saw colored stones laid out in the dip that announced I LOVE U SUBASIO. And he'd laughed.

LOVE in the form of a red heart. Strange that someone expressed their feelings in bumper sticker language, and English. He shouldn't have laughed, though, not when they cared enough to say it in letters and symbols larger than a man.

Over the ringing in his ears, David heard the yapping of a dog. Then he saw it through the rain, found himself staring at the same dog he'd seen with the woman at the outlook, a feisty little mongrel, unnerving woman.

The darned critter grabbed his jeans and started to pull. It tugged at him as if he were a juicy bone, and shook his leg. In agony, he kicked himself free, making the dog fall back.

Now he could hear the thudding hooves of galloping horses, and in his mind see Conquest, War, Famine and Death, the forces of man's destruction, The Horsemen of the Apocalypse. He looked up, imagining the four of them standing on the rim above. Perhaps he had gone mad, or suffered a delusion of the damned.

David blinked several times, reducing their number to one. The black horse pounded down the slope toward him, and as he stared at the hooded figure on it, his skin prickled and his hair really did stand on end.

"Whoa, Matteo." The rider stopped the animal in front of him. It lowered its head, snorted and blew rain into his face. Growling, the pooch sunk its teeth back into the cuff of his jeans.

"Bad dog, Tito." A woman said who spoke English with no trace of an Italian accent.

He heard a rustling sound as she swung a leg over her horse's back, dismounting. The rustling came from a plastic poncho.

She stood over him and pulled down her hood. He caught a glimpse of wild gray hair, illuminated by sheet lightning. A gust of wind lifted the hem of her poncho, revealing her jeans and sneakers.

"No need to fear, I am not the Grim Reaper." It was the woman from the outlook. She. What she said, and being so close to her, sent shivers running through him.

The horse snorted and stamped its feet. The dog continued to yap.

"Matteo, Tito." Tuned into their owner they fell quiet. Horse. She didn't have the horse with her before.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"I got struck by lightning. My chest hurts like ..."

"How did you get down here?"

"I crawled. Look, who are you?"

"I am Nola."

“Your dog told you about me, then?” He didn’t mean it quite the way it sounded. Dogs couldn’t talk and neither could he much longer. His throat hurt more than his chest.

Smiling, she took hold of his shoulders and stood him up as if he weighed nothing. “Never mind Tito, he is a free spirit. Look, you are shaking, calm down. We shall get you to shelter. I shall take a look at the burn on your chest.” She peeled off her poncho, put it on him and tugged its hood up over his head.

“Matteo.” When she issued the command, the horse came to his side, nuzzling his hand. “He likes you.”

“I hope so.”

She lifted his foot into a stirrup. “Up you go.” Without saying another word, she pushed him into the saddle, took the reins and led the way down.

At first, David tried to sit straight, but agony sunk its claws back into him. Hurting, he slumped forward and twined his fingers into the horse’s mane to stop himself from toppling off. Nola was right. Her horse did like him, didn’t appear to mind his bumping lump of a body.

The lightning and thunder passed on, but it still rained hard. Every cell of his body and brain throbbed, but pain came with being alive. He shouldn’t complain. Much more of this, though, and he’d float back out of his body.

As they plodded down a steep trail below tree line, he started to slide forward, so he squeezed his knees into the horse to stay in the saddle. “Take it easy on me, boy, take it easy.” His vision clouded. He couldn’t endure this torture much longer.

David stared into the rain, at Nola’s blurred figure. This chunky, middle-aged woman must have guessed he’d run into trouble and followed her dog back up the mountain at the height of the storm. He found it hard to understand that anyone would be so foolhardy. Yet she’d come to his rescue and appeared to have everything under control.

“Where are you taking me?” He tried to sound as if he had his act together.

“My cottage.”



The horse's hooves crunched on gravel and the terrain leveled out. A dirt road would be a rough ride, but he trusted it meant that her cottage would soon be in sight.

## Chapter 2

**Bouncing** in the saddle made David's body so sore that he shut his eyes and murmured a mantra. Part Buddhist, part his own invention. "Om mani padme hum. Lead me out of this hell. Om mani padme hum."

His ears stopped ringing. A bit of relief, thank goodness.

They arrived at the cottage, a home on a farm. He could hear the bleating of a lamb and smell the odor of dung.

A man pulled him off the horse. Everything spun around him, the gravel road and the cottage threshold. A kitchen sink, a doorway and Nola's smiling face, and then he landed on his back on a bed. He heard her and the man talking in the kitchen, but couldn't focus on them. The horse's hooves clattered on the gravel and faded.

Waiting now, too long, for what felt like an hour.

Rebuild faith and belief, what did that mean? Were the powers above telling him to be more positive about the Middle East? No. It couldn't have been as surreal as that. It wasn't God talking to David Bruno, not when he'd heard a woman's voice. God or whoever, or whatever, didn't hurl a bolt of lightning and then speak to him. The voice he heard must have been his brain going crazy while being starved of oxygen. Yet how could those black clouds he'd seen on the horizon come so fast? Why did the lightning have to strike him?

"What the hell's happening to me?"

Gentle hands eased him into a sitting position. "You must not swear. Now raise your arms." He did, wincing as pain shot through his chest. Nola peeled the plastic poncho off him and pulled up his T-shirt. Her face reappeared as the shirt slipped over his head.

She wore a dry top and blue jeans. Her gray hair looked as wild as ever, she must have towed it dry, and it hadn't seen a comb or a brush. She wasn't a young woman, not that much younger than his mother.

For an uncomfortable, mind scrambling moment her sharp blue eyes peered right through him. Then she smiled and focused her gaze on his chest. Despite his pain, he lost the queasy feeling of balancing on the edge of a precipice and sank back on the bed.

Her hands flitted over him, bathing the burnt and blistered wound in a solution that hurt like a wasp sting. Then a wave of soothing warmth passed through him, and she produced a gauze pad from nowhere, taping it to what good skin he had left. No way would he want to play poker with her when her hands moved faster than a blur.

She pulled off his sneakers and glanced at the soles. "They have melted."

"Fried like the rest of me and I think I died for a while." He didn't think he could ever bring himself to mention it.

"Ah, a near death experience. It is possible, but what matters is that you are safe now."

"While I floated over my body, you didn't whisper to me, did you?"

She frowned, took off his socks and started rubbing ointment onto his feet. "You had a narrow escape, Mr. Bruno."

"You know my name?"

Nola showed him his passport and billfold before placing them on the night table. Both of them looked damp. "They fell out of your pocket when Angelo lifted you onto the bed."

"Angelo? He's not an angel is he? Are you?"

She didn't answer.

"Are you God?"

"Of course not."

His brain must have been dizzy to suggest it. He took another guess. "Angelo's a farmhand. You must be a nurse."

"I am a retired teacher from Bologna. I am not a nurse. I work part time at Ponte Salvezza, teaching Italian and English to the children of the east."

“My parents came from Bologna.” Children of the east, she’d probably be talking about immigrants from North Africa, Muslims.

“Bologna, then we have something more than the mountain in common.” She finished massaging his feet with ointment. “You need to see a doctor, and a dentist.”

“Doctor. Dentist. I don’t think so.” He probed his shattered front tooth with his tongue. Lightning blasted an angled gap. The entire corner of the tooth had gone missing. He didn’t want anyone prodding him with a stethoscope or yanking out teeth if he could avoid it. He’d soon get over this clash with these magical forces. Yes, weird magic, that’s it.

Back at Harvard, he wouldn’t have hesitated to see a doctor, but here he wouldn’t entertain the idea, which puzzled him as much as imagining hovering above his own body after the thunderbolt struck. He must be in denial about something.

Denial wasn’t uncommon in lightning victims. One fellow, blasted in the face while making a call from a phone booth, didn’t go near a doctor, and he, an orthopedic surgeon, should have known better. Lightning even changed his fundamental makeup. He went on to become a concert pianist when he had no previous musical talent.

“God help me if I change that much.”

She frowned again. “I’m surprised that you of all people would offer a plea to a deity. Now, do you have any other burns?”

“Not as far as I can tell.” His whole body still burned yet he couldn’t bring himself to admit it.

“I need to pee.” Too darned direct, but he had to ask. Nola helped him out of bed and steered him to the toilet. Humiliating to have someone take him to the bathroom, handle him like a geriatric patient.

She guided him back to the bedroom, “You shall have plenty of sleep. Now please wriggle out of your clothes and slip under the bedcovers. I shall make some tea.”

“Why are you doing all this for me?”

“I am the Good Samaritan, and you are the black sheep.” Smiling, she left him to undress. Somehow, she didn’t look like

a teacher, or the Good Samaritan, but he could be the black sheep.

His wet jeans clung to him, so he sat on the edge of the high bed and kicked them off. Nearly naked now, but he couldn't part with his boxer shorts. They protected his modesty. Modesty, hah, he didn't have much of that left. Teeth clenched, he stood. Folded back the covers and slid between the sheets, trying not to make painful, jerky movements.

Nola reappeared, balancing a tray with a cup and dish on it. "The honey in this tea comes from the bees on the farm. The gelato is the nectar of Assisi, limone, my favorite." She placed the tray on his lap, fussed around behind him arranging the pillow between the headboard and his back. "This tea has special healing qualities, you shall enjoy it."

"I hope so." Lord, he sounded like a croaky old frog.

As she hurried out of the room, he fed a spoonful of the gelato into his mouth. Without swallowing, it glided over his tongue down into his aching throat. The gelato didn't smell of lemons, of anything, but he'd never possessed much of a sense of smell.

The tea slid down, too.

He placed the cup in the gelato dish. Pushed the tray onto the night table and retrieved his billfold and passport. The money inside the wallet felt wet. He needed to spread it out to dry.

Her little brown dog landed on the bed with a thump. Shining black eyes stared at him and a long nose came within an inch of his, but he didn't mind at all. Settling, the animal pressed itself against the bump in the covers made by his hip.

Nola came gliding in and sat on the end of the bed.

Amazed, he watched her place a laptop computer on the covers. "I typed in David Bruno and Googled you. You are the madcap philosopher from Harvard, are you not?"

"Let's just say I'm into history and philosophy and leave it at that."

"I logged onto your weekly blog."

"Oh, what do you think of it?"

“Some people say you shine like the moon and the stars and smile like the sun. Others claim that you do the work of the devil.” He shouldn’t have asked.

Nola made him downright nervous. A glint in her eyes, the corners of her mouth turned up, she looked mischievous. Not a bit like the friend who’d dressed the wound on his chest.

“I’ve been writing what many Americans think.”

“Many Americans think you are a badass.”

“That’s great, a teacher who says badass.”

Her dog let out a sigh as he stroked it. “Look, I feel I’m imposing on you. Perhaps I should leave.” In his present condition, he couldn’t afford to get into an argument about anything.

“We shall talk about you leaving when you have rested. It is good to see you with Tito. I think he likes you as much as Matteo does.”

“You didn’t have the horse with you when I saw you at the outlook on Subasio. How did you ...”

“Matteo, he likes to graze on fresh grass, to feel the tug as his teeth sever the blades. He loves to smell the sweet scent of it. So I indulged him in his pleasure on the slopes and walked to the top of the mountain. I left him not far away. He knew I would need him. He did not stray.”

She answered his question before he finished asking, and talked about the horse as if it were human. He’d run into a weird, uncanny woman.

Nola slid off the bed. “I should not have brought this computer in. But I could not resist.” She swept out of the room.

He had his passport and billfold. Flying back home to the States wouldn’t be a problem. That’s what he needed to do. Put the Atlantic Ocean between this magical out of body experience and himself. Return to the familiar environment of Harvard. Get plenty of sleep in his Boston apartment. Recharge, plant his feet firmly on the ground, reestablish his bearings and forget about all of this.

David felt sweaty, sticky. As if, he’d stayed in bed for weeks. He ought to take a shower, but he’d never make it out of there if he dallied.

Grimacing, he slid his hurting body from the bed and wobbled to the doorway. Conscious of being half-naked, he swallowed hard as Nola stared at him from the kitchen sink.

“I’m going back to Assisi and the Hotel San Francesco.” A relentless force tugged him toward the outside, yet maybe the desire to breathe fresh air drove him to leave, to roam free and feel alive.

“You are a restless fellow, and you’re nearly naked.”

“I’m hoping for dry clothes.” He glanced at the cell phone on the counter. “Do you mind if I make a call?”

“Of course you can.”

He took the phone, flipped open his billfold and with a couple of trembling fingers tugged out a scrap of paper. Limp and damp, but he could still read the hotel number.

When he dialed, the number rang four times and an Italian computer voice came on, saying, line out of service. “Nola. What’s the name of this place?”

“This is the cottage at Apricala.”

He held the cell’s mouthpiece close to his lips, telling a white lie, “Apricala cottage. You’ll send a driver right over. Good. I’ll be waiting outside.”

“They’re sending someone to pick me up.” Bad of him not leveling with her, but he didn’t have enough breath. He hadn’t arranged anything with anyone, certainly not with a computer. He’d have to hike down to the valley, take a cab or thumb a ride.

She handed some clothes to him. “Here is a dry T-shirt and a pair of jeans. As you can see I have tiny feet, so you will have to wear your melted sneakers.” She’d given him a vivid red shirt. It could have been the only one available, but it did lead him to think she took the side of those who thought he did the work of the devil. He had no right to think ill of Nola, though.

Her face split into a wide grin and it made him wonder if she knew what he’d been thinking.

“I shall make a parcel of your damp shirt and trousers with the poncho. You will need the poncho in case it rains again.” She went into the bedroom with him, scooped up his wet clothes and the plastic slicker then left him to get dressed.

Nola must have stretched the T-shirt while wearing it, but baggy in front left breathing space for the dressing that covered the burn on his chest. Big jeans, loose in the thighs and in the seat on him, chunky Nola.

He pulled the soggy money from his wallet and spread the bills on the bed, four twenty-euro bills, two fifties, all of it worth about 300 dollars. Not much, but it should cover some of what he owed her.

Bending, David held onto the edge of the bed and found his sneakers. Melted rubber soles and exploded air cushion heels, but they'd have to do. He slid his billfold and passport into his trouser pockets. Shoved his feet into the shoes and paced across the room to the door. The lumpy heels made him hobble. The soles squeaked. It could be his fried feet squeaking, though. Lightning could cause anything.

He stumbled into the kitchen. Nola finished wrapping the poncho parcel then tucked the package under his arm and smiled.

Then she threw her arms around him so quickly that it made him gasp.

Soft hair enveloped him, brushing against his face and neck, silky dark hair that Nola didn't have. Tender lips pressed to his forehead and kissed him, sweet lips. "Now you shall have the nose of the hound, and you shall not be able to resist talking to the delightful."

Dazed, he found himself a yard away from her, mouth open, gaping at her wild, gray hair. "What the hell!"

"You must not swear, Davide. What I bestowed on you shall sharpen your senses and strengthen your resolve."

"I don't want any special powers. My resolve's strong enough. I don't need my senses sharpening."

She laughed.

"Look, Nola, I'd better get going."

"It's been good to know you, Davide. The car will come up the road from the valley. Take a left. The stable is to the right."

"I'll call you from the hotel tomorrow." David hobbled into the night, sniffing, and kept going to the left for thirty yards. As



he stepped behind a big tree, stopping for a minute to catch his breath, he realized why he'd sniffed.

Everything smelled, his underarms, the plastic of the poncho, the bark of the tree and the earth beneath him. The night air carried the balmy scent of moisture. Everything gave off a characteristic odor it appeared. He'd never encountered anything like it before. It could be this area, but that wouldn't explain the strong odor coming from his body.

He could also smell the hairs on the back of his hand. Having a new and supersensitive nose couldn't be bad. New nose, hah.

Fatigue tightened its grip on him. Nola was right. He shouldn't have tackled this. He didn't have the wits or the strength to hike down to the valley. So what, his heart pumped and that's what counted.

He'd bed down in the stable for a few hours. It would be better than going back to the cottage and eating humble pie. "Om mani padme hum, one small step at a time."

It must have taken him half an hour to steal back around the cottage through the woods, but he needed to play it slow in case his legs crumpled. Goodbye cottage, now he had make it down the road to the stable.

The storm had blown over. It must have been the stars that urged him to come outside, not a fuzzy mind or pride. What a glorious night. His sneakers squeaked louder as he started downhill, though, and his legs felt weaker than wet spaghetti. So weak that he thought they would fold under him and he'd bite gravel.

A doggy smell wafted at him. Tito. He must have gotten steamy rushing from the cottage. "Go back to Nola, will you. Darn it, you'll pull me onto my face if you don't stop tugging at these jeans."

Tito the free spirit scampered ahead. David saw a long wooden building to his left. The stable, the front of it bathed in starlight.

Exhausted, afraid he'd fall, he staggered toward it seeing the heads of five horses, all in a row and turned toward him. The

odor of horse manure invaded his olfactory sense, but he didn't find it offensive.

The horses continued to stare as he stumbled along the boardwalk. Each time he passed a horse, its head turned and its gaze followed him. The nameplates above the stalls read, Axel, Silver Snort, Bolt and Generale. Then he came to a stall at the end that didn't have a nameplate and found himself looking into the eyes of a good friend, Matteo the magnificent black stallion who carried him down the mountain.

While Generale reached over from the next stall and nuzzled his elbow, he patted Matteo's shiny head. "Do you have any room in there, Matteo?"

The horse whinnied.

"Thanks, I'll take you up on it." Matteo shuffled backwards as he opened the gate. Tito shot between his legs. "OK, it's the three of us." Matteo nuzzled velvet lips against his arm, so he reached up, hugged the stallion's neck and twined his fingers into its mane. The soft hair smelled like grass after a shower of summer rain.

Releasing the horse, David collapsed into a pile of hay. Tito burrowed in between the poncho parcel and him. Matteo, head out over the gate, stood guard over both of them. Weird that he felt at ease with animals when he hadn't had much to do with them for years. Yet he had loved being around them as a kid, and did like these two. Matteo, a fine stallion, Tito, not a bad puppy at all, the kind of friends he needed.

At last the warmth of the hay and being in good company seeped into him. His eyelids drooped. He drifted off.

The sound of Tito yapping stirred him to semi consciousness. Confused and sweaty, he thought he heard a spooky voice calling him Davide.

Fuzzy, he tried to understand what happened. Rebuild faith and belief, a meaningless message, unreal. An imaginary voice sparked when the lightning struck and ricocheted neurons around inside his head. It couldn't have been anything else other than that, or an oxygen-starved brain sparking vivid thoughts. That strange woman Nola didn't have had anything to

do with it, either. She was simply being generous to a man in distress.

Daylight shone through a crack in the stable's wallboards. He needed to get moving. It wouldn't do for her to find him here. For her to realize that he'd lied about a driver taking him back to his hotel.

He sat up, wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand, stared at Matteo and sniffed. His stomach made a gurgling noise. Either he'd gone loony or he could smell bacon. Tito's nose twitched, too.

Matteo backed up, stamping on the wooden floor.

Nola appeared, leaned over the gate and grinned. "I bring a present for you from the farm, Davide. American breakfast."

## Chapter 3

**He could tell** by the amused look on Nola's face that she knew he'd faked the phone call to the hotel. Yet he couldn't understand why her expression didn't aggravate him. David Bruno the Harvard professor would have been more than put out of joint at the slightest sign of someone making fun. This scorched David didn't even have a ruffled feather.

A picnic table covered by a blue and white tablecloth sat on the far side of the boardwalk. Bacon, scrambled eggs, toast and 2 steaming jugs of coffee, quite a spread, and with layers of delicious smell. "Nice of you, but you didn't have to ..."

"Sit."

He lifted a leg, sat and swung the other over the seat. Such an awkward movement didn't bring a wave of pain. Surprising, when sitting up in bed at the cottage yesterday evening hurt as much as having a tooth drilled without Novocain. "I didn't see this table here last night."

"Angelo is very strong; he helped me to bring everything down."

"He must be as strong as a horse." She had a lot of strength, too. Power, some of it magical, that he found quite disturbing.

Nola sat opposite him, spooning gelato from a dish, an out of place dessert with the yellow tint of limone. Tito hopped onto the seat beside her and she slid a dish with a couple of greasy bacon strips in front of him. Front paws on the table, the little dog began chomping.

"Italiano or Americano, Davide?" She darted a finger at the frothy coffee before pointing to a jug of steamy liquid the color of mud.

"Better make it high test." He wished she wouldn't keep calling him Davide.

She filled the cup in front of him with foamy Italiano.

He bit into a slice of bacon. "Don't you ever eat meat?"

"No, I do not. Gelato is my staple. It is the elixir of the universe."

He shouldn't have sat down with this confusing woman right now. He should have shot her a smile and said, let's have breakfast some other time, tightened his belt and trudged down to the valley. She dangled solid food in front of a starving beggar, though. No, not a beggar, he was plain hungry.

Sipping, he decided he didn't mind Italiano sneaking into American breakfast. "Mamma, this packs a jolt."

"I am not your mamma."

"I phrased it as an expression, a word of emphasis." An English teacher good enough to be familiar with American slang, and call him a badass philosopher, ought to have noticed that.

As she slipped the last spoonful of gelato into her mouth, he grinned. "Maybe I should switch to a gelato diet."

"It wouldn't hurt." She pushed a roll of bills across the table. "Here are your euros, they are dry now."

"I'd like you to have them." He always paid what he owed.

"Very well, I shall donate the money to a charitable cause."

"Great idea." He finished eating the scrambled eggs. "Look, I ought to get going."

"I talked to the manager of your hotel soon after you left the cottage; he is sending a driver with your suitcase."

"What? I don't need the suitcase up here."

She grinned. "Ah, the plans of mice and men."

David shook his head. This woman had depths he hadn't even imagined. Quoting Steinbeck as if well acquainted with the Nobel Prize winning classic, fluent in Italian and English, and probably Arabic, he could see he would have a tough time matching wits with her. "Look, I can't stay at your cottage."

"You really are restless, Davide. But before you leave, you must spend a little time with someone important who wants to talk with you."

"Who? Where?"

Nola stood and pointed to a tree-lined path on the other side of the gravel road from the stable. “You will find them along there. Tito will show you the way. I shall tell the driver where you are. While you are in Umbria, you should take time to smell the wild roses, the lavender and the rosemary. Now you must excuse me. I shall help Angelo tend to Matteo.”

“Yes, I do need time to unwind.”

When David reached the path, Tito blew straight past him, yapping as if saying, eat my dust.

He didn't appear to have pains in his chest, or shortness of breath. Nola must have spun a protective web around him, although his system might crash when he got back to the San Francesco hotel, away from her influence. Her influence, he didn't need it. He'd be fine on his own. He dealt in hard science, truth, fact, history and evolution, not in confusing mystery and magic.

The path and the trees lay behind him now and he stepped out into an open area. Gravel crunched under his melted sneakers again. Tito bounced along in front of him in stops and starts, sniffing at everything. The perky dog seldom missed a chance to cock a leg and water a flower or an inviting tuft of grass.

David smelled a chicken coop and heard a harsh cry that sounded as if it came from a cockerel. Turning, he saw a peacock staring back at him from a spacious cage. Colorful tail fanned out, the feathers quivering.

A showy peacock, Superdog Tito, a strange woman, he would probably run into a clump of lavender that talked.

A thorny bush grabbed the sleeve of his T-shirt. Unhooking himself, he inhaled heady perfume that came from a white flower the size of a pocket watch. He couldn't resist taking another deep breath and indulging in the depth and sweetness of its bouquet, and remembered smelling a wild rose bush when he climbed up to the outlook on Mt. Subasio. A bush that didn't have the powerful aroma of this, or could it be that his nose had become more sensitive and he'd changed, or Nola had somehow changed him.

Tito tugged at his trouser leg, urging him to take a muddy road to the left. Bushes on either side of him now, tractor tire marks under his feet. No perfume here, the stench of manure hung in the air. Sheep for goodness sake.

David stopped at a wire mesh gate. “Tito, where the heck are you? Oh, you bad dog, you’re chasing around the manger in the center of the pen, scaring the sheep.” He scrambled over the gate, intending to get feisty Tito out of there.

Sheep bumped his legs as he paced toward the manger. Another ran out of a wooden shelter to his right, distracting him, and he tripped and fell on his face. Gasping, David rolled onto his back, spitting out mud and hay. Sheep peered down at him from all around. Brown eyes fixed on his.

For a moment, he couldn’t see anything other than dumb faces, dirty woolly bodies and legs. Yet as he continued to stare, he spotted a small animal with pure, white legs.

Tito yapped, scattering the sheep.

David pushed himself to a sitting position and gazed at a lamb. Ears out wide with their tips bent down, shiny nose pointed at him, it stood and stared. “Come here, Sweetie.” He couldn’t believe that he’d called a lamb Sweetie.

Good thing his New York literary agent couldn’t see him with his butt in the mud, holding out a hand, whispering sweet nothings to a lamb. She’d laugh herself silly if she saw her numero uno moneymaking author petting it.

The tiny critter wobbled toward him like a novice on stilts. Its skinny legs crumpled, somehow folded underneath its body, and it ended up leaning against his hip. The lamb didn’t have the barnyard smell of the other sheep. It carried a faint odor that reminded him of Gorgonzola, one of his favorite cheeses. Although it could have been its woolly rear that smelled a bit poopy.

Leaning to the side, he hugged the lamb. Not caring what anyone thought.

Tito rushed up to it, tail wagging as if greeting a long lost friend, but the little dog only sniffed. Then it hopped around to the other side of him and plunked itself on the mud. David

tugged at the puppy's ear. "You're okay. You're not a bad dog at all."

Feeling at peace with the world, he gradually relaxed. The furor that raised its ugly head over his work of nonfiction no longer rang in his ears. It felt great not to have to defend himself, and not have to keep looking over his shoulder. Stroking this lamb and Tito beat the hell out of giving lectures and going on book tours.

"It does make sense to stay here a little longer, Sweetie." He could be out of his screaming skull, but he could have sworn that the lamb murmured, yes. Yet it could be its stomach trying to digest a bad batch of hay or a sour mouthful of milk. Darn it, he ought to go up to the farm and buy it a jug of milk.

Tito stuck a wet nose into his hand. "I guess you don't want me to leave Italy, either."

The lamb nuzzled his leg and focused its dark eyes on his. "You know Sweetie; you're making a mistake taking a fancy to me. I'm the kind of guy who'd turn you into lamb chops."

"You not do that!"

He looked up and saw a girl standing to the side, frowning. She stood a couple of inches shorter than he did. A scar on the right side of her face curved out from beneath her chin, up over her jawbone, ending an inch behind the corner of her mouth. Wearing a cardigan whiter than lamb's wool, knee length gray skirt and black shoes, she must be on her way to school. Thirteen or fourteen years old, he decided, young enough to be his daughter.

She darted forward, scooping the lamb up in her arms. Her brown hair flopped over her face as she lifted the critter off the ground.

"Hey, I'm kidding. I didn't mean to hurt it. Pull up a piece of mud and sit down."

She sat cross-legged, hugged the lamb and studied him. "You are Davide Bruno?"

"The name's David. What's yours?"

"Pippa."



She had a delicate olive complexion and looked beautiful despite the scar. She also smelled of fresh bread. “You must have been helping your mamma do some baking.”

Some of the frostiness in her eyes melted. “My mamma, she makes bread for Apricala, and clean the rooms. Her friend Nola sent me to meet you. Nola says you will teach me to talk like the Americanos. She says you are nice, but I think you are notta nice.”

“Come on. You must have heard everything I said to this cutie.” He reached out, giving the lamb’s ear a playful tug. It shook its head and bleated. Tito thumped his tail on the mud. “I wouldn’t harm a hair on this little dog, any more than I’d hurt Sweetie.”

Pippa gave the lamb a squeeze. “Sweetie. Yes, I like the name you give her.”

This young woman must have been involved in an accident, but plastic surgery would take care of the scar. Maybe her parents couldn’t afford it, though.

“Sweetie’s mamma, she died in birth on Saturday.”

He tried to recall the date, then the day of the week, and came up with an embarrassing blank. “I know this sounds stupid, but a lot’s happened to me since I arrived in Assisi. What day is it today?”

A smile spread over Pippa’s face. “Wednesday.” She stared at his T-shirt. “Why do you have the bump in your chest?”

He looked down and chuckled. The tape Nola used to secure the dressing came loose. Bunched together under the shirt the bandage looked like a woman’s breast. “I got into an argument with lightning and have a burn on my chest. I’m lucky I’m not dead.”

“I glad you did not die.” She held out her left hand. “I cut this finger in Mamma’s kitchen, Nola bandaged it good. Do not worry; she will take care of you.”

“She already has.”

A swarthy man wearing a chauffeur’s hat leaned over the gate, speaking Italian.

“Louie says he will take you back to the Assisi hotel. If you wish to stay at Apricala, he will leave your suitcase.” David had

understood what Louie said, but thought it best to let Pippa do the interpreting.

She'd tackled him like a tiger for kidding about lamb chops, but he couldn't help taking an instant liking to her. First impressions counted. He knew he could trust her. "What do you think I should do, young lady?"

Again, she smiled. "Nola will teach you much, Davide."

"The name's David."

"I think you are Davide."

"Okay." He liked her so much already that he didn't care what she called him.

"Tito and Sweetie will teach you also."

He could learn a lot from Pippa, too. It wouldn't hurt him to stick around for a few days. He'd still have time to catch his flight back to the States. "Do you want me to stay?"

Pippa nodded.

"Why don't you ask Louie to carry my suitcase up to the farm."

## Chapter 4

**As Pippa** bedded the lamb down in a pile of hay, it stared back as if to say, don't leave. Nothing seemed straightforward anymore. David could feel the woolly critter pulling at his heartstrings.

Lightning, or fate, hadn't just softened him. It melted his shield, his Teflon toughness. His new and emotional soul stood out like a flag of surrender.

People didn't have souls, or did they? Heck, he was as out of place here as a Buddhist would be in a revival meeting back in the States.

Pippa didn't appear to think him as being out of place, though. Maybe she could read between the lines and see his confusion.

"I take you to Apricala."

"Shouldn't you be at school?"

She grinned and tapped her head with a finger. "When I wake up, I dressed like school, but mamma, she told me it is teacher's day. I forget to change clothes before I come see the sheep."

"I'm having a few brain hiccups myself."

Pippa and Tito led him through a crowd of nosy, woolly animals. Past the manger and along a hedge in a field littered with droppings.

Several sheep followed with a woeful look on their faces as if reluctant to see him go, but he could have become so sensitive that he imagined they gave a baa about him. Yes, he'd lost his marbles.

The confident days when he wrote his book had gone, the days when he felt sure about everything, full of himself, full of piss and vinegar.

Pippa unlatched a narrow wooden gate, slipping through. Tito waited before rocketing after her.

The illusion of wellbeing that came with eating Nola's bacon and eggs vanished when he squeezed between the posts. Pain came back with vengeance. Grimacing, he twisted his body, closing the gate.

David followed Pippa back along the same path he'd taken from the stable. "Slow down, I'm having trouble keeping up."

The horses stared at him in unison from the boardwalk as he turned up the gravel road. Matteo, at the far end, nodded his black head. Lips curled back, white teeth gleaming, the magnificent steed neighed a greeting.

No breakfast table, Angelo must have flexed his Popeye muscles and whisked it away. David couldn't see the slightest sign that Nola's generous breakfast ever happened, a whiff of bacon, a crumb on the ground or a single speck of scrambled egg.

As he struggled up the gravel road, Tito kept dashing around. Kicking up pebbles and dust, scurrying loops around him. "Stop it will you, you're making me giddy." He wished he could muster a nanowatt of Superdog's energy.

In the cage to the right of the open area, the peacock gave a magnificent feather display. For the first time, he saw the brown peahen, a demure little thing.

More gravel road to climb. No wonder his legs hurt when he'd stumbled down to the stable from Nola's cottage last night. Tromping this road again brought the muscles in them close to bursting. Lightning, or fate, kicked him hard again.

Nola's cottage stood at the top of the hill. He hoped she would join them, and wanted to talk to her about the lamb.

Pippa dropped back and paced beside him. Nice of the youngster to show concern, but he didn't intend to become anyone's problem, hers or Nola's.

Quite aside from lightning having zapped his body, something strange whirred inside his head. He needed to sort things out and stay positive. Be glad to have such beautiful company on a marvelous day, a warm day with blue sky dotted by a few puffy clouds, and not a breath of wind. He needed to

keep thinking that way if he wanted to enjoy the gift of a new life from ...

He stopped with the word God on the brink of his blurry mind, but then muttered, "Why the hell not say God." To him, the great and late philosopher, the word God meant all things mystical and magical.

Pippa frowned. "Hell and God are never together."

"Sorry. I'm kind of mixed up."

They came to a flat area of cobblestones, arrived at a group of ivy-covered buildings that sat near the bottom of another steep road and led up to what looked like a country motel. Olive trees spread down the hillside to his right in a shimmering display of silvery green leaves. Skinny leaves that would quiver if the weather god stirred up a breeze. He could also see beehives and grape vines.

A big man with a prominent Roman nose appeared from a doorway in front of him, and he liked the look of the man and his benevolent smile. A slight smell of garlic seemed to hang around the fellow.

"Gianni, this is Mr. Bruno. He wishes to rent a room at Apricala."

"Nola talk to me. Come, my friend, I show you room."

Glad to have a good welcome like this, David took out his wallet.

"We talk business later." Gianni waved a hand, leading the way along the wall of a building. Not one building, two joined together by a derelict brick oven. Windows peeped out of the wall between ivy tangles. The ivy could make the room as dark as a dungeon. He needed plenty of daylight, though, and hoped not.

Pippa stuck close to him as he followed Gianni around a corner at the end, but she shot inside with Tito the moment the host swung open a door. "It is a nice room. The suitcase is here."

David hobbled inside as Gianni left, finding Pippa sitting in a wicker chair in the far corner. A delicate aroma of lavender drifted in the air, yet he could still detect a layer of bread scent coming from her.

She bounced onto her feet. “I go, and change out of my school clothes.” As she closed the door behind her, he collapsed on his back on the bed, grabbing a moment of rest.

David rolled his eyes, checking things out. Great, he thought, a bed with a wrought iron head and foot.

The painting of Saint Francis on the wall opposite the footboard looked a bit heavy on the religious side, though. It showed the saint with a halo around his head, doves on his shoulders and at his feet. Several angels knelt in the background, praying.

The room had an antique wardrobe, a coffee table and a full-length mirror. He’d rented a spotless hideaway, far from being a dungeon. The ivy that framed the windows gave the place a welcome air of privacy. David liked it. He couldn’t see a lock on the door, but a farm on the flank of Italy’s Mount Subasio wouldn’t need locked doors.

He slid off the bed, trod on something soft and heard a yelp. “Tito! Sorry boy, I didn’t mean to step on you. Guess you’re my dog now. You stick to me like bubblegum.”

Tito wagged his tail as if agreeing.

“Glad to have you, pooch.” David popped open his suitcase, rummaged through it, pulled out his spare jeans and the comfortable sandals he needed. His cell phone lay in the case, but he didn’t feel like carrying it. His harmonica sat there too, although he was too far gone to make music, even the blues.

After plucking out a golf shirt, he spread it on the bed. Golfer, not him, friends at Harvard gave him the shirt as a joke. He’d never bothered to take a lesson, and had the dubious honor of having the most irreparable slice in the world.

Soon, his melted sneakers and Nola’s spacious jeans lay on the floor at his feet. As he pulled her red shirt over his head, the tape and bandage fell from his chest.

Stunned, he staggered to the mirror in his boxer shorts and gaped at a bald patch the color of new flesh. Reeling, he shook his head. Less than a day passed since the lightning struck. The angry, blistered crater burned by his medical tag couldn’t have healed that fast. The pink skin stared back at him as he

examined himself again. No trace of a scar, and it looked as though the hair would soon grow back in.

The burn had healed in twenty-four hours.

No, it couldn't have. He must have been out cold for days in Nola's cottage, right out of this world and healing. It couldn't happen this fast. It couldn't be a miracle. Magic, maybe, anything went with that.

David grabbed the golf shirt, tugged it on and eased into his own jeans. He stuck his feet into his sandals, fastening their Velcro straps to make sure they didn't fall off. If he moved quickly, a small piece at a time, perhaps he wouldn't hurt too much. At least he ought to try.

Weird that he ached all over yet the burn on his chest looked better. Again, he shook his head. He must break this philosopher habit of examining every minute thing, stop worrying and go with the flow around him.

The olive grove, yes he'd sit in the shade of a tree for a while. Gaze at the countryside and figure what to do. David lurched toward to the door. Slipped out into the sunshine and crossed the cobblestones. Four rows of trees down from the road should be far enough.

He sat with his back to a tree trunk, closed his eyes and listened. Tito, his four-legged shadow, leaned against him and rested a whiskery chin on his leg.

David could hear a cuckoo repeating its call like a cracked record. Bad news, cuckoos kicked eggs out of other birds' nests to make room for their own. They were too lazy to feed and raise their young. He didn't want any part of them.

A lump prodded him in the back, a knot beneath the bark. This gnarled tree could be very old. The trees on either side of him looked aged, too. Younger and smaller ones down the slope, though. This ancient beauty could have seen Mussolini's Black Shirts high stepping in the valley below. It could have witnessed Hitler's army rolling through Umbria with their Panzer tanks. Perhaps the tree stood here when Napoleon's soldiers marched through.

In his travels, David had seen an ancient olive tree in Israel that was over three thousand years old. This one here in Italy

could have stood proud when Saint Francis tended to the poor and the lepers.

You muse too much, Bruno. You should have been a plumber instead of a Harvard professor. Smarter than philosophers, plumbers didn't beat their neurons to a pulp trying to solve the world's problems. They kept life uncomplicated. Soldered pipes and billed customers hundreds of dollars a pop.

Something nipped at the big toenail that stuck out of his left sandal. He snapped open his eyes and saw a pigeon. Another one strutted forward as if it owned shares in a peck on Bruno enterprise. Three more pigeons appeared. They kept coming. A dove landed on his shoulder, startling him. He inhaled the scent of its feathers, indulging in yet another fresh experience.

Lord, this could be an Alfred Hitchcock movie where birds pecked out people's eyes.

Swallows whirled around the olive tree like miniature jet planes. A lark spread its wings and tail feathers, landing beside him, so graceful and singing its tiny head off.

"Listen you guys. I'm not an ornithologist, a bird watcher, or the Bird Man of Apricala. I'm a raw recruit with plenty of rough edges when it comes to handling feathered friends.

"Why don't you move on like I'm trying to? All right?" A chorus of squawks greeted his suggestion. Above the noise, the lark still sang its song.

How could he tell a lark to fly away when it trilled such a beautiful melody? How could he tell a dove to buzz off when it cooed in his ear? Yes. He did have a dove on his shoulder. Its claws dug into his shirt and pricked his skin.

"Tito. Get up and shoo these winged wonders away. Do it, you lazy dog. For once, be the bad bird-chasing dog. Hop to it. That dopey look on your face is driving me bonkers." David leaned forward, patting Tito, but the dove didn't fly away. It maintained its balance on his shoulder. The pigeons that gathered around his feet didn't flutter a feather. The lark continued singing its song.

Nola must have planted seed in his pockets. Be playing a joke. Searching, he came up with a handkerchief. If she could



perform a magic miracle healing his chest, she could have somehow imparted the smell of birdseed on his person. He chuckled, realizing how alienated from reality his thinking had become.

No doubt about it, these birds breathed, hopped and flew. He couldn't be imagining them.

"Okay. So all you birds will do is to sing, tweet, squawk and coo. I'll keep chattering. Do you think me rude for leaving Nola's cottage so soon after she brought me down from the mountain? Come on, let's have some answers."

The same pigeon that pecked his toe pecked it again.

"Ouch. Knock it off, you scavenger. Here's another one for you birds. Where do I go from here? I'm talking about me, David Bruno the philosopher who got his whiskers singed by lightning. Darn it, I feel like I'm starring in a Disney flick. That would make you birds cartoon characters, no better than paper cutouts.

"What do you think, Mrs. Dove? Do I try to make a go of it in Umbria, or should I clear out of Italy? Heck. I don't know what making a go of it means. Yes, I want a reply from you my glossy friend. Bird speak will do. You squatting on my shoulder, cooing in my ear as if you love me isn't an answer."

David caught a whiff of candle wax and heard someone whispering. Two men wearing the voluminous habit of friars stood under a nearby tree. A black, pleated habit with a matching cowl around the shoulders and a white cord knotted around the waist, Conventual Franciscan friars from the Sacro Convento.

One friar looked skinny, the other chubby. Modern friars of Assisi, below the hem of their robes David could see blue jeans.

Smiling, they peered as if they knew him.

The three knots in the dangling end of the cord that tied the friars' habit in at the waist signified vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. David's best-selling book made him wealthy. Ornerly and far from celibate, he had nothing in common with these Franciscans.

Beaming, they moved on through the grove, leaving him with the feeling that he should have explained about the birds.

Yet how could he explain birds away when he didn't know what to say.

A tiny brown bird zoomed in on him just missing the pigeons. The lark didn't budge. It kept singing. The tiny one landed between his feet, carrying something red in its beak. He couldn't be sure what kind of bird, but it might have been a wren.

When he extended his hand in welcome, the bird dropped a berry into his palm. Then it chirped for a minute as if getting something important off its chest.

David sniffed the berry, detecting the odor of mint. A berry that shone like a gem, and he couldn't help but feel lucky to have it.

The dove on his shoulder spread its wings, tickling his ear. Someone coughed.

He looked up expecting to see the friars again.

His young Italian friend stood there with her mouth wide open. Eyes focused on him, awestruck.

"Pippa! I'm a worn out American author and philosopher. A has been. I'm not Saint Francis."