

## CHAPTER ONE

“**S** hhhh...! Silence! *S'il vous plait!*” hissed the middle aged librarian. She was reacting to a teenage girl whose playful yelp echoed loudly throughout the main atrium of the library. When the boy sitting across from the girl looked up, a mischievous smile formed on his face. He had reached beneath the table and rubbed the girl’s leg.

“*De`sole`*, ma’am... I’m sorry,” the girl replied, embarrassed. When she looked back across the table toward the boy, the girl whipped her leg forward and kicked him. “Stop playing around!”

“You know you like it,” whispered the boy, and he was right, because the girl smiled in response.

In contrast to the muted voices inside the library, outside, the bustling city of Paris was alive and filled with sights and sounds. Older housewives sat on the steps of the famed Notre Dame, sharing their silly gossip, pausing for a moment while a rickety old steamer blew its whistle, alerting all to its presence while traveling slowly down the Seine River.

Off in the distance, the appetizing aromas of freshly baked bread announced the noon hour as the famed Les Halles market came to life. Old men taught their young protégés how to cut large wheels of cheese into

more manageable wedges for the hungry customers lined up for a taste. Women shopped for daily food supplies and the latest Paris fashions. Even with the winds of war on the horizon, everyone in the marketplace enjoyed their food, their wine and their lives.

While she swept in front of her small boutique, a beautiful young woman hummed a sweet melody. Little boys had their noses pressed up to the window of the local boulangerie as the baker put out freshly baked cookies for display. The proud Parisian faces beamed, showing all a kaleidoscope of emotions. As they were eating and drinking, the narrow cobblestone streets come to life.

A cute little monkey entertained the children while his proud owner, the organ grinder, played a bouncy melody. Forming a circle around the humorous monkey, the excited children dropped coins into his tin cup as he waved it around and tipped his hat. A few feet away, an old woman, a former cabaret singer, seductively danced to the music in the air, not caring that all the attention was being placed on the monkey instead of her. Across the green, cafés were filled with chattering people eating pastries and sipping café. “*La Vie Douce*,” yes, it was the sweet life.

Amidst all the music, dancing and laughter walked an old man named Jacques Mesnil, born in 1872 in Brussels, Belgium. Jacques was an excellent student who wanted to become a doctor, but after attending medical school, he found life unrewarding and boring. In 1906, he moved to France and became an Anarchist, then a Communist. Now, at sixty-six, the age most Parisians retired, Jacques was still working as an art critic for *Culture*, a prestigious French journal. His current assignment was to create an article on one of the more famous Renaissance painting masters of the art world, Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi – better known as Botticelli.

The editor of the magazine wanted to know more about Botticelli. Who, they thought, was better qualified to find out than Jacques? He was an old-school, hard-nosed investigative reporter who, unlike his younger counterparts, wouldn't take months or years to research and prepare an article. That just wasn't his style. Instead, Jacques would stay up sometimes for days while investigating the subject of his article. Once he had all the facts, his article was finished within a week.

The editors loved his tenacity, but because Jacques was getting older, they decided to lighten his load. They gave him the title of "Art Critic," a title he detested. To be sure, Jacques didn't easily take to this change. He often told the other employees that what his boss did was tantamount to putting him out to pasture.

*I'll show them,* he thought.

Jacques was now going to be back in his element as an investigator. It didn't matter that his subject had been dead for almost five hundred years. He was going to find out everything he could about Botticelli if it was the last thing he did.

Jacques' investigation focused on Botticelli's masterpiece, the '*Madonna of the Magnificat*.' It was currently displayed at the Uffizi gallery located in Florence, Italy. The '*Madonna of the Magnificat*' portrayed the Virgin Mary crowned by two angels. In it, the Child Jesus was holding a pomegranate, a symbol of the Resurrection. Also included in the painting was the family of Pierro Medici, Lord of Florence. His wife, Lucrezia Tornabuoni Medici, was the model for the Virgin Mary; Pierro Medici's oldest son, Lorrenzo Medici, was in the painting holding the ink pot; and alongside him, holding a book, was his younger brother, Guilano Medici. Standing over and behind the two boys was their older sister, Maria, while holding the crown over the Virgin Mary's head were their two younger sisters, Bianca and Nannina.

After having walked from his studio apartment, Jacques Mesnil turned onto the new Avenue de l'Opera, heading toward Rue de Richelieu. It was a long journey to make for his research, but he consistently did this several times a week. He was on his way to the Bibliotheque de Paris (Library of Paris), the oldest continually running public library in the world, dating back to 1368. Somehow, Jacques suspected the librarian who always greeted him had been around back then as well. Still, as he entered the building, he tried to remain courteous.

“*Bonjour, mademoiselle,*” he said with a respectful tip of his hat.

“*Bonjour, monsieur,*” replied the librarian with her usual smile. Then, in his usual manner, Jacques walked right by her, ignoring her response. Having seen Jacques on several occasions, the librarian had often tried to engage him in conversation.

For example, today she asked a simple question. “How is the weather outside?”

He opened his notebook, looked down into it, as if there was something there needing his immediate attention, and then the cantankerous old man growled, “Go look for yourself!”

During his research, Jacques became particularly interested in the materials Botticelli used — the paints, glazes and canvas — to produce the ‘*Madonna of the Magnificat.*’

What also fascinated Jacques was the technique Botticelli had developed in creating his masterpiece. Jacques was intrigued by Botticelli's highly personal style, characterized by the elegant execution of his masterful strokes, as well as the sense of melancholy imprinted on the faces of the subjects and his strong emphasis on lines and detail. All of this aroused Jacques' curiosity and drove him to look deeper into the life of the man Botticelli had become.

## Sandro: The Forsaken World

Born in Florence, Italy, Alessandro di Mariano was the son of a tanner. Orphaned in his teens, he somehow picked up the nickname ‘Botticelli.’ No one knew where the name originated, although most art historians believed that when he was an apprentice for a goldsmith, he took the name of that gold master. After serving an apprenticeship with another painter, Fra Filippo Lippi, people began calling him by the name ‘Sandro.’ Having also worked with the painter and engraver, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Sandro spent most of his adult life painting portraits for the great families of Florence. He especially painted for the Medici family, most notably, Guilano Medici. The ‘*Adoration of the Magi*’ was painted on commission—though not by the Medici family. Still, it contained the likenesses of the Medici family, as did ‘*The Madonna of the Magnificat*.’

Botticelli was also commissioned to paint for the church, though he put pagan symbols into his work, as was the case in the ‘*Birth of Venus*.’ In that painting, he depicted Venus, a mythological Greek goddess, as a symbol of both Pagan and Christian love.

As Jacques dug further into Botticelli’s life and art, he discovered another painting done around the same time as the ‘*Madonna of the Magnificat*.’

This second painting was a portrait of the Medici family. Having intimate knowledge of the work, ‘*Madonna of the Magnificat*,’ Jacques thought it odd that one of the faces from this painting did not match one of the faces painted in the second painting, the Medici family portrait.

The face of the younger Medici boy, Giuliano, was different in the two paintings.

*Why would there be two different faces?* Jacques wondered.

Perplexed, he stood and stepped back from the desk. Still curious, he bent closer and stared down at the two paintings in the book. He noticed

the younger boy in the family portrait had a birthmark on the left side of his face, while the very same boy in the '*Madonna of the Magnificat*' painting did not.

Botticelli was a master artist and meticulous in every way, down to the smallest detail.

Jacques thought, *Why wouldn't he have painted the two faces identical?*

With his academic curiosity aroused, he walked away from the desk and sought out the librarian.

Finding her laboring over a stack of books one of the other inconsiderate visitors had left out, Jacques cleared his throat and began, "*Par'done, mademoiselle*, but could you kindly point to where there may be other books containing the works of Botticelli?"

Jacques hoped the librarian had forgotten how rude he had been earlier and, much to his chagrin, she smiled and politely pointed to the far end of the room, toward an aisle containing thousands more books. Without thanking the librarian, Jacques rapidly walked to the other side of the library. To his delight, he immediately found eight more books highlighting the artists of the Renaissance. Feeling his excitement start to rise, he gathered them up and returned to his desk. After what seemed like hours, Jacques found that the books only told him what he already knew. Botticelli was poverty stricken most of his life, lived in shacks and was not recognized for his genius until after his death. Getting nowhere, once more Jacques reluctantly sought out the librarian.

"*Mademoiselle*, is there not another place I can find books for my article? It seems all of the books I've found carry the same information." Irritated, his desperate voice began to complain, "My God... Botticelli was one of the world's best painters!"

The librarian continued her work of putting away books while smiling and politely listening to Jacques' complaint.

Right away, she thought, *Now I'm glad I didn't strike up a conversation with him... he's a complainer.*

Disinterested, she tersely answered, "Sorry, I guess that's all that's here."

"Please mademoiselle, you must help me!" continued Jacques. "It is imperative that I find more information!"

*Maybe if I ignore him,* thought the librarian, *he'll tire and go away.*

"You are the librarian, are you not?" asked Jacques sharply. His normally cantankerous manner had gone and now he was totally perplexed because of the librarian's obvious inability to grasp the urgency of his needs.

"*Madame*, PLEASE!" he pleaded loudly, but the only reaction his plea got from the librarian was an elevated "Shhhh" when she stopped putting away the books and turned to face him.

"*Monsieur*, please... please lower your voice."

Softening his tone, Jacques offered, "*Par'done, par'done*, forgive me, but..."

The librarian smiled again and, accepting Jacques' apology, she pointed toward a door across the large reading room.

"That leads down to the basement. There you will find a section of archives that came directly from Italy. I avoid going down there as much as possible. Everything is covered with dust, but the information you're hoping for may be buried downstairs."

Jacques turned and started for the door. When he turned back and looked at the librarian, she had already returned to her duties.

“*Merci beaucoup!*” he said loudly and hurriedly walked away, prompting the librarian to once again whisper, “Shhhh.”

Glancing over her shoulder at Jacques, the librarian sarcastically whispered under her breath, “Such a pompous fool. Art critics... they’re all the same.”

As Jacques descended the stairs, the air was filled with a stale, musty odor as dust particles floated into his nostrils. When he finally reached the bottom, the dark and quiet basement reminded him of the Roman Necropolis beneath the Vatican Basilica. Jacques had seen stranger places in his life than this eerie basement, so it didn’t bother him a bit. Besides, all he wanted was a quiet place to conduct his research and it seemed he had found it in the bowels of the Bibliotheque de Paris.

As he surveyed his new surroundings, Jacques found a dusty old chair, lying on its side next to a desk, and a small window above that was covered with a thick layer of dirt. The ambient light was obscured by the window filth, so Jacques decided to open it, thinking that, along with more light, he would let in some fresh air. After forcing the ancient window open, he dusted off the chair and table and lit a candle he found on the floor.

Walking over to the first bookshelf, he noticed that the books were covered in such a thick layer of dust that it was almost impossible to read their titles.

“God, she was right,” he mumbled, referring to the librarian. “Dust is covering everything.”

After skimming through a few dozen books on the Renaissance era, Jacques came upon a stack of stained and torn papers. They were shabbily bound together with a cord and the cover page, scrawled in almost illegible writing, said, ‘*The Life and Works of Botticelli.*’

A chill went down his spine as he carefully opened the bound pages and read a section outlining the church's ire for Botticelli. They called him arrogant for painting paganism into Christian settings. Included in the archived information was the previously unknown fact that Botticelli had never married. As a matter of fact, the author of the work specifically mentioned Botticelli's strong aversion to the idea of marriage; the prospect, he claimed, gave the artist nightmares.

Jacques stopped reading and chuckled inside for a moment. He considered what he had read and thought of himself, since he also had never married. He wondered if he and Botticelli shared a common belief. Contemplating that very thought, Jacques realized he had never fallen in love with anyone because he had dedicated his life to his work. He never made time for anything else.

As he thumbed through the book, Jacques found another section that said Botticelli's contemporaries thought he had suffered from the unrequited love of a married noblewoman named Simonetta Vespucci. Her likeness was used for Botticelli's famous painting, *'The Birth of Venus,'* and despite the fact she died years earlier, he continued to paint her face in his latter works.

Jacques found several more paragraphs pertaining to the fact that maybe Botticelli's work was involved in the Bonfire of the Vanities, which he remembered reading about in another book. As the story went, Florentines burned certain books, paintings, poems and literature at the urgings of a priest named Savonarola. Some of Botticelli's paintings were deemed as immoral and wicked, which brought about a feud between the two men.

Quickly, Jacques' reading pace increased as he began to turn the pages wildly. Disregarding their delicate state, he came to one particular page in

the book. His eyes mesmerized to the page, he continued to stare at it curiously for a while. Questioning his eyesight after what he just read, he moved the book closer to the candle for a better view. After reading the last sentence again, Jacques jumped up from his chair. Staring down at the open pages, a clue about the artist's life stood out. There in front of him, written plain as day, was a charge made against Botticelli himself by the priest.

*'Botticelli mantiene un ragazzo... Botticelli kept a boy!'*

It had simply been signed... 'Savonarola.'



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