

# PASSACAGLIA



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'I'm just warning you Kiera, take care!' said Ruby, as she finished her cappuccino, 'There's a saying: "*All'ombra di Roma c'è un altro impero.*"'

'You'll have to enlighten me,' Kiera sighed, 'I'm struggling to remember even the little Italian I had. I feel such a fraud. I'll never fit in with the regulars on the recital circuit.'

'Roughly translated,' Ruby adopted the tone that she used when explaining to her students, "'In the shadow of Rome there is another empire". There always has been, Kiera: down in the catacombs . . . behind closed doors. You can step from one to the other without realising. Please be careful!'

They sat at the corner table on the terrace at Maxim's, overlooking the parched grassy expanse of the Circus Maximus. Just like when they'd been at college, Ruby - Professor Ruby Sinclair as she now was - with her tattoos and her raggedly-cut blue hair, was the one who looked streetwise while Kiera felt that she still floated wistfully through life like a latter-day Ophelia.

A hoot below.

'My taxi!' Kiera stood, picked up her viola case, and took a deep breath, 'Wish me well.'

'I do,' said Ruby, giving her old friend a hug, 'but I don't like the look of that . . .'

Too late. Kiera had hurried down the stairs faster than Ruby could follow her. A spiky-haired driver in baker's whites leaned over to fling open the passenger-side door and hustle Kiera inside.

With difficulty, she squeezed herself and her viola case into the little Fiat. The driver took his chances and burst out into the traffic along the Via del Circo, charging along, Kiera thought, at pretty much the speed of the chariots that once raced here.

'Is big?' he frowned as he glanced at Kiera's battered black viola case, decorated with faded stickers, '*Non piccolo?*'

'No, definitely not a piccolo!' said Kiera, looking puzzled, 'The boys in the band would blow you away with their "Fanfare and Canon". Me, I favour a gentler touch. Subtle but sure: I always hit the spot!'

'*Una Beretta?*' he glanced at her and whistled through his teeth, evidently impressed.

'No, the best: a Guarnari. It never leaves my side.'

To her relief, they slowed down as they negotiated the crowds behind the Colosseum then turned off onto a side street by the ruins of the gladiatorial school. She was surprised when, halfway along the road to Laterano, he pulled in and parked on the worn cobbles.

*'Silenzio!'* he led her to a battered old door, its timbers so weather-beaten and graffitied that, despite its size, it almost blended in with the crumbling, stuccoed wall. As he unlocked it with an oversized iron key, she was astonished by what lay beyond.

An archway opened onto one of the secret gardens that she'd seen tucked away behind the grand terraces of the old city. They stopped beneath a vine-covered pergola and he pointed to a figure, a white-haired old man, sitting on a bench with his back to them, glass of wine in his hand, watching the afternoon light play on a small fountain, which was the centrepiece of the garden.

'Let him have it!' he whispered croakily as he thrust a bulging brown envelope at her, 'Here, no need to count it: it's what we agreed.'

He turned and sloped off into the shade of a cypress, head held down and, Kiera thought, close to tears.

A performance is a performance, she thought as she pocketed the unexpected fee and took out her viola.

A passacaglia: she played with the free-spirited lilt of a gypsy musician, perfectly balanced by a crisp precision in her bass line; a dance to the music of time.

Now it was the old man who had tears in his eyes. He turned and saw the sobbing young man standing by the cypress.

'Renato! Come here my boy. You did this for me?' he asked, hugging the young man, 'The Frescobaldi: how could you have known how much that sad old song means to me? "*Così mi disprezzate,*" - "How you despise me"!

'After all I said to you, my son, you've found it in your heart to forgive me. I was so wrong about you! I've been thinking that it's time for me to go back to the hills to tend my vines and olives. It's time for new blood, time for me to let you run the business.'

'I think that your work is done here!' a familiar whisper in her ear and she turned to see Ruby, larger than life, standing there framed by the old archway like a classical deity, 'And, in case you've forgotten, you're due to play with the ensemble in fifteen minutes, but we've got plenty of time to get you to San Giovanni's.'

Kiera was surprised to see a taxi waiting for her, parked alongside Renato's Fiat.

'There was such a scene as you hurtled off from Maxim's!' Ruby explained as the taxi continued towards Laterano, 'No sooner had you zoomed off than your taxi, your real taxi, arrived. At that moment a young woman rushed out from Spadino's Bar and, like you, she was carrying a violin case. "Don't you know who I am?!" she shrieked as I climbed into the taxi. Well, I know enough about Rome's Underworld to recognise her as Araceli Adami, the jumped-up little floozy who's been trolling around touting herself as an international assassin.'

Kiera looked horrified, 'And what happened then?'

'In a contest between Araceli Adami and Professor Ruby Sinclair, there was only ever going to be one outcome!'