

SUSAN MEISSNER

AUTHOR OF *The Shape of Mercy*

THE
GIRL
IN THE
GLASS
A NOVEL



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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

THE GIRL IN THE GLASS
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

Apart from well-known real people and real events associated with Medici history, the characters and events in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-307-73042-8
ISBN 978-0-307-73043-5 (electronic)

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Cover design by Kelly L. Howard

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meissner, Susan, 1961–

[To come]

[To come]

[To come]

[To come]

Printed in the United States of America
2012—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



For Bob, because he promised to take me to Florence. And he did.

Everything you can imagine
is real.

—PABLO PICASSO

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork at each corner. The word "Prologue" is centered within the frame in a classic serif font.

Prologue

The sun is setting on my last day in Florence. Tomorrow I will marry the man my uncle has chosen for me and Florence will be at my back, perhaps forever. My soon-to-be husband will have no reason to come here after we marry, and my uncle will not expect to see me again. His responsibilities for me, such as they are, will be done.

My cousin Maria does not understand my melancholy at the prospect of leaving forever the place where my life began. "What has Florence ever brought you but heartache?" she has said more than once.

And if I've any kindred souls in this world besides her, perhaps they would say she is right.

But within my heart so cruelly handled, there are unseen places that have been shaped by Florence's beauty. Florence is a coin with two sides, a room with two doors, a river with two banks. Everything that wounded me happened here. And everything that brought me solace happened here too.

Maria brought me to Rome with her to see me out of Florence, out of the maelstrom of Medici woe that she believes Florence is to me. Maria does not know that Florence alone speaks condolence to me; I couldn't wait to return. Only Florence, in all her vast majesty, assures me that as much as people can create ugliness, they can create splendor. It is all around me in Florence: the ache of loveliness, in every work forged by human hands that can kill as soundly as they heal.

And now it seems I must bid farewell to my very soul.

Maria is calling for me. The carriage is ready. My uncle would have us leave for the Villa dell'Ambrogiana before darkness falls.

As I depart, Florence safeguards my childhood treasures, buried beneath the marble and within the frescoes and in the threads of the canvases. All my longings, whispered on dark nights and gray days, I press them now into the folds of my city, so that as my shadow falls away from Florence forevermore, I shall not be forgotten by her.

Nora Orsini

October 1592



When I close my eyes and think of home, I always envision Florence—a place I've never been.

The red and cream hues, remembered from the paintings on my Italian grandmother's walls, speak "home" to me as much as any address where I've ever lived. My grandmother is gone now, and her pictures and paintings have been scattered among my father's family members. But with my eyes shut, I can picture the rosy cap of the cathedral dome, the toast-colored stucco, the lizard-green Arno River as it lazes down its course. I can hear the odd cadence of European emergency sirens, the zipping of Vespas down asymmetrical streets, and the acoustic darts of a language I don't understand beyond simple endearments spoken by my *nonna*. I can smell the cappuccino—because she told me hers smelled just like it—the perfumed doorways of the fashion houses, the dense exhaust of too many cars. And I can feel the cool, silken flesh of *David's* marbled feet if I were allowed to stretch out my hand and touch them.

Even now, so many years later, I can see the canvases on my grandmother's living room walls—the litho of Botticelli's *Primavera*, the oil Nonna had done of a woman walking in the rain in a puddled piazza, the watercolor of rows of Italian cypress, and a young man on a bicycle.

But the one of a young girl reaching toward a beckoning statue is the only one I still dream about. My great-great-grandfather painted it when Nonna was young, before she and her parents immigrated to America. My

grandmother was the girl in the painting, and the statue stood in the Florentine background. A palette of russets and burgundy and ocher filled the rest of the painting with depth and elegance, with a hint of blossoms to come.

Nonna used to tell me I was the girl in the painting, just as she had been when she was a little girl, an impossibly wondrous thought that I clung to until well after my eleventh birthday. Nonna, as the young girl, whose back was to my great-great-grandfather as he painted, wears a rosy-pink gown that glistens in the sunlight playing behind her. I used to imagine the statue was speaking to the girl and that's why her hand was extended—as if she were inviting my grandmother to dance, to join her world of joy where anything unexpected was possible. I loved that painting and thought of it often, long after my parents divorced, long after my mother and I moved to San Diego and the visits to Nonna's dwindled. Nonna was going to take me to Florence when I graduated from high school to find the statue, but she died when I was twelve. I never saw that painting again after she died.

My father promised his mother, as she lay dying, that he would take me to Florence in her stead. I wasn't there when he promised her this. My mother and I were in San Diego when we got the call two days after she died that Nonna had had a massive heart attack. But Dad told me of the promise when my passionate grief over Nonna's death left him grappling for words to make me stop crying. Six years later, however, in the summer months following my high-school graduation, Dad had knee surgery. From then until now, the promised trip to Florence has been in a perpetual state of postponement. From time to time he'll remark that we need to take that trip. He hasn't forgotten, but it's almost as if he's waiting for something to happen—or change—before he can make good on that promise.

Eighteen years after Nonna's death, I marvel that the mention of her birthplace still sounds like the name of a matronly soul, kind and sweet. Florence—a woman with ample arms, a soft voice, and silver wisps in her hair. I've been to London and Paris and to Aruba twice for publishing conferences. But the closest I've come to visiting Florence are the phone calls I make to one of my authors who happens to live there.

A phone call to Lorenzo always makes me feel decidedly homesick.



I awoke to early-April coastal fog, frothy white like a bridal veil, and my first thought after remembering I'd be Skyping with Lorenzo before nine, was that my ex-fiancé would marry that evening.

A blanket of mist cuddled Bird Rock and the rest of the San Diego coast with a ghostlike embrace as I lay scrunched under the covers, wondering if Miles was feeling nervous or afraid. Was he thinking of me, even just a little? Would the unintended wound I gave him two years ago needle him as he got ready for the day? I hoped not. I didn't want to ruin his wedding day twice.

Coffee drunk, cheese omelet eaten, I gave scant thought as to what to wear to work. I wouldn't be rushing to Balboa Park for twilight nuptials. I chose a denim skirt, red-and-white-striped knit top, black flats. Chrome jewelry. Ponytail.

I was pouring a second cup of coffee into a travel mug when my cell phone rang. My mother's ringtone. I fished the phone out of my purse and answered with a cheerful "Hello, Mom."

"Meg. You don't have to pretend. It's me."

"Good morning to you too."

“You doing okay? Really?” In the background I could hear her pushing buttons on her microwave.

“Really.”

“But today is not just any old Friday.”

I replaced the carafe on the coffee maker and pressed the Off button. “I’m fine. I’m the one who broke up with Miles, remember?”

“Of course I remember. That’s doesn’t mean you enjoyed having to do it. Or that you are enjoying this. You and Miles dated for two years. He’s marrying someone else today.”

“But I’m happy for him.” I screwed the top on my travel mug.

“Yes, well, I didn’t call him to see how he’s doing today. I called you.”

“And I’m fine.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“I am. But thanks.”

I heard the sound of the microwave whirring to life.

“So, I was thinking if you’re free tonight, we could meet up at the Melting Pot for dinner.”

My mother loves fondue restaurants. No one touches your food while it’s cooking but you. No one touches it when it’s done cooking but you.

“Why? Something up?” I grabbed my car keys and then knelt to unlatch the kitty door for Alex, my borrowed cat. He brushed past me, meowing his thanks, and disappeared through it into the tiny backyard of the cottage that I am caretaker for.

“I just want to have dinner with you. I... There’s...” But she didn’t continue.

I stood up. “There’s what?”

“Nothing. Can you come? Are you busy?”

Since breaking off my engagement with Miles, I’d given myself a year

to heal—wounding someone could be just as painful as being wounded by someone—and then had spent the next twelve months slowly reentering the dating life. I'd gone out on a few dates, but I hadn't met anyone I'd wanted to rush into a relationship with. My mother had applauded my caution. Elaine Pomeroy always applauds caution. "Better safe than sorry" would be tattooed on my mother's forearm if she wasn't convinced tattoo artists don't properly clean their needles. She was all for me taking it slow. Gabe, the graphic designer at the same publishing house where I work, is the closest I have come to dating anyone exclusively. We've gone out a few times. The thing is, a dating relationship is always going somewhere. Even nowhere is a place. I didn't want to mess up Gabe's and my workplace friendship with a potential dating destination like nowhere. So I recently backed off—a sublimely cautionary move my mother applauded—and Gabe gallantly retreated. And I am not dating anyone else at the moment.

I had no plans for the evening of Miles's wedding.

"What time?" I asked.

"How about seven thirty? Unless you want to do it earlier. I was thinking we'd miss the worst of the evening traffic."

"Seven thirty is fine." I turned off the kitchen light and reached for my purse. "See you then."

"Oh. And your father is probably going to call you today."

My arm reaching for my purse paused midstretch. It wasn't odd that my father might call. Our amicable relationship includes occasional phone calls and the even more occasional visit. But it seemed odd to me that he'd call today, out of the blue. Dad surely didn't know Miles was getting married that night. He couldn't have known. Unless my mother had called and told him. Seventeen years postdivorce my mother still calls my father to

remind him of things she thinks he will forget, as if it still matters what he does and doesn't do.

"I'm telling you I'm fine, Mom."

"It's not about Miles getting married. I'm sure your father couldn't care less about that. I didn't call him. He called me."

"What for?"

"He lost your new cell phone number. All he has is your work number. So I gave it to him. I wasn't going to without asking you first, but he said he needed it to talk to you about something. And he didn't want to call you on your work phone."

As my mother talked, I began to conjure possibilities as to what my father would think important for me to know that he couldn't tell me at work. Maybe at long last he was setting a date for our trip to Florence?

"If he is coming down today and wants to see you, do what you must," my mother continued. "But don't bring him to the Melting Pot."

The tone in my mother's voice was a mix of apprehension and distaste.

"I won't bring him. And I doubt he's coming down. He could tell me that at work."

"There've always been a great many things he could have done and didn't."

Sunlight was peeking through the marine layer outside my kitchen window, reminding me that a full day at work awaited. I was due to talk with Lorenzo in less than fifteen minutes. It could take that long just to get from the cottage in Bird Rock to the office in downtown La Jolla, especially if all the good street parking was taken.

"Hey, Mom. I've got to run. I'm Skyping with one of my authors, and I don't want to keep him waiting."

"Call me if you're going to be late tonight. And tell your father to give you a bit more notice next time."

“I doubt he’s coming down. I’ll see you tonight.” I headed for the front door, travel mug in hand. “Okay?”

“All right. Oh. And it’s quite foggy this morning on the coast. Saw it on the morning news. Don’t rush out into it. If it’s too bad, just go in later.”

I hung up and stepped out into the lacy vapor.