

the
BOTTICELLI
AFFAIR

TRACI L. SLATTON



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The Botticelli Affair

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the
BOTTICELLI
AFFAIR

PROLOGUE

EVENING WAS VOLUPTUOUS, FILLED TO BURSTING WITH good and evil, for the one who listened.

Let's take him during the night, get his daughter to find it for us!

Their proposal was a whispered chord, a call through the ether to others of their kind. They could link minds this way, after feeding as a group, which let them join consciousnesses and broadcast a message. Feasting together made them powerful, heightened their senses. Would they know he was there, Bolingbroke wondered, standing in the shadows, listening? He who no longer was like them, but also was not unlike them?

John Bolingbroke no longer knew what, exactly, he was. He used to be just like *them*, the coven he now watched. In fact, he was only half different from them. He still possessed all the same seething dark passions. He still experienced blood lust in all its tender ferocity. His senses still took in a welter of information that no human could possibly understand. Nor did he age. He looked exactly as he had in July, 1483, more than five hundred years ago, when he was last human.

But Bolingbroke no longer had to feed on a living vein. Nor was he required to avoid the sun. He had a heartbeat, he had yearnings for love, his chest burned not just with desire but also with loss and anguish, just as humans felt. But he was no longer human, just as he was no longer vampire.

Fifty years ago, a whimsical god granted him half a soul and bestowed upon him unruly, inescapable powers. Bolingbroke had a capacity to astral-project out of his body, a capacity that neither humans nor vampires possessed. He could see the protean umbra of spirit infusing and spilling around

living things. And he could overhear vampires' world-spanning telepathic calls. Bolingbroke was changed. He was gifted and tormented. He was alone. His exquisite clairvoyance showed him how different he was from all others. Now, spying on the coven to which he had once belonged, he wondered if his half-soul would expose him to them. If it did, would they kill him? Could they?

No, they would not discover him. The cool damp basement stone of the Metropolitan Museum of Art shielded him from their perception. The hum and patter of hundreds of humans overhead also helped. All those living, pulsing heartbeats were far more interesting to vampires than a halfling—half-undead, half-alive—with no coven or station of his own. John Bolingbroke was on his own, the ultimate outsider.

He preferred it that way. He liked freedom.

The vampires were gathered in a circle at the center of the cavernous space. They were a coven, eleven, and an elder coven at that. Vampires formed and re-formed themselves into groups, according to their shifting whims, but certain covens stuck, even when individual members had intertwined into dozens of other side alliances. This coven was old, powerful, and vicious. Bolingbroke distrusted them. He watched them both because he didn't know what they would do to him if they discovered his differentness, and because he had promised humans that he would spy for them. Bolingbroke kept his promises. That was a matter of honor, and honor was his existence.

Bolingbroke liked humans. For the first hundred years, he did what every vampire does: used, ravished, and carelessly murdered humans for their delicious hot wetness. Then it all changed. Bolingbroke remembered the exact moment when the value of humanity broke across his cold undead mind: December 25, 1652, in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. He had followed a young prostitute into the church. She had stumbled in from the cold, stealing a moment for a Christmas prayer between customers. Bolingbroke wasn't able to feed on her in church, of course. The sanctity of the space almost paralyzed him. He intended to follow her back out to the Tiber's cold auspices, where he would feast on her. Why not? She held her life in such little esteem that she would sell herself into the most degrading acts. Bolingbroke offered her an escape from that, an exit during which she would redeem herself by nourishing him.

First he stared at her silky black hair swinging over her shoulders under a white mantello, her cloak. Then his eyes turned toward the altar.

But it wasn't an altar he saw. It was Bernini's masterpiece: the ecstasy of St. Teresa. Teresa's beautiful face was thrown back in bliss conjoined with pain, a look that Bolingbroke knew well: that shattering moment when the supernatural intrudes on earthly flesh, when earth and not-of-this-earth meet. Bolingbroke had seen it on the faces of his entrees as he drained the jugular. His preternatural sucking elicited a tremor of agonized pleasure through a human's circulatory system. That tremor rippled through the fascia, through muscles and nerves and deep into the spinal cord. Bolingbroke never understood it, the ecstasy of being pierced. He recognized it, though. And here it was on this exquisite marble face.

How was it possible for a mere human to know this expression? And to know it so intimately, so precisely?

How was it possible for a mere human to render this expression in lifeless stone?

What kind of mastery was this, that a vampire could not begin to attain? Because a vampire could create this image in flesh for only a moment or two, while Bernini had created it for as long as stone endured.

Bernini, that weak human, was victorious.

In comparison, the immortality of vampires was emptied of its meaning.

Struck with wonder, Bolingbroke staggered back. He asked himself what his time on Earth meant. He found himself sitting on a pew, staring. He could not look away from the cherub with his arrow pointed into Teresa's core. The prostitute left the church. Mass rose and fell. The sacred liturgy enervated vampires, and Bolingbroke was weakened, but he could not leave. He kept staring, staring, would have wept if he could have. But vampires did not have tears.

That was the moment that inspired his appreciation for the frail beings who did not know that they were not alone upon the earth, but were stalked by stronger, remorseless predators. Predators who were physically stronger but devoid of true mastery. True mastery entailed creativity, the power to make art that could give the viewer an experience of revealed truth. Bolingbroke, from the moment he laid eyes on St. Teresa's ecstatic face, hungered for that power, that mastery. It fired his quest to return to human, a quest which had come to partial fruition, and a total dead end, fifty years ago....

Now, in the present, underneath the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they heedlessly tossed an object to the side. It landed near Bolingbroke. The sick earth scent and flailing limbs identified the object as a dead human. A woman: young, pretty. She was pale now, her lovely face still twisted in rapture. This old coven—Intihuaca, the leader, was an Inca from Pre-Columbian Mexico—had drained her. They had shared her blood so they could participate in a telepathic call.

This planning made Bolingbroke even more uneasy; vampires were coordinating around the world. That meant danger.

Let's kill him now!

This call came from a distant coven, and Bolingbroke heard it as if he were still a vampire. He didn't need to feast with the others. He could simply receive the message.

Wait, it is not time to act on our plan... The call was answered by Intihuaca, whose great age and cunning were respected by vampires around the world.

"Perhaps he'll have the painting soon, and we can proceed?" whispered the youngest vampire, a small female with a mass of raven hair. She was birthed in the last century, but had already maneuvered her way into this powerful coven. She was sly, covetous, relentless, remorseless, cold to the suffering of other creatures: all the qualities Bolingbroke hated most in vampires. And in himself, when he'd been one. She had taken his place, in fact. She was welcome to it, but she bore watching. He recalled her name: Kadja.

Intihuaca grunted. "He may have come to an impasse. That's the reason for the call. But the pieces are not in place to make the time ripe for our plan."

"You're right. We shouldn't take him too soon, as bitter a blow as it would be to his group." The female smiled. "He may yet obtain the painting. Let's take his daughter."

"We wait and watch, and gather information." Intihuaca shrugged. "We could use her as incentive. Though he has severed relations, so perhaps he doesn't care anymore."

"He cares. Fathers always do. Human fathers." The female chuckled softly. "Laila Cambridge matters to her father. He will protect her at all costs. I say we take her now."

Bolingbroke stilled his indrawn breath. He knew the woman they meant, Laila Cambridge.

Intihuaca considered. “Not yet. We watch her; we know where she is. She also knows the world wherein we seek the painting. If he fails, she will succeed.”

Bolingbroke had watched Laila for the last decade. Initially, her work had brought her to his attention. Her clever way with a paintbrush reminded him of an old friend, Michelangelo Buonarroti. Bolingbroke had admired Laila’s work, back when she was painting. Now he respected her determination to make something new of herself, something better. He identified with the impulse.

He had also worked with Laila’s father, admired the man’s passion to protect his kind. And through him, Bolingbroke had come to know Laila as a young woman of substance and character. He’d promised Robert he’d protect Laila.

The question was, could he keep that promise, if the coven wanted to use her?



Chapter 1

I SAT IN MY FAVORITE BAR ON West 23rd Street and Tenth Avenue, checking out the hottie as he walked in and seated himself near me. I'd come here to look over my books and think about my dissertation. At least, that's what I told myself—though lately I'd been wondering whether I just came here to drink. Columbia University had good places to look at books and this bar was located far from them.

And then in strode Tall, Dark and Good-Looking, and the angles of his face fascinated me. I forgot the book on the counter.

He noticed it, though. I have to give him credit, he seemed to notice the paintings before he fixed on my tall-with-lots-of-red-hair-and-boobs thing. Good man.

“Botticelli? You're a painter?” he asked.

“Not anymore,” I said. And wouldn't it solve some problems if I still were? “The Botticelli book is for research. I'm getting my doctorate in art history.”

“Impressive. The book's in Italian, you speak the language?” he asked.

“Where are you from?” I responded. A blunt non-sequitur, but it changed the subject.

“Italy, originally.” His eyes crinkled at the corners as if he were trying not to smile at my suave confrontational style.

“That's not an Italian accent.” With diplomat parents, I had traveled the world. Picked up a bunch of languages along the way, too. It was useful for an

art history doctoral student to have that kind of fluency, though it had been useful in my former profession, too.

"I've passed through many other places since then," he said, tilting his head in a way that smoothed the craggy edges of his features and gave him an aristocratic bearing. It also made him look familiar.

"Do I know you?"

"Not yet." He smiled, and I decided he was way too good-looking in a high-cheekboned, rough-hewn, barbarian way for me to let any chemistry progress. No more handsome men for me. "What's your interest in Botticelli?"

"I'm writing about him," I said, then grimaced. I was blocked, had been for months, and it was derailing my career as an art history professor. A career I was convinced would redeem me of my past sins. If anything could. "Trying to." I sipped my drink and looked at him out of the corner of my eye. Wavy dark hair cut close to his head, broad shoulders held very erect, and, if I was guesstimating right, about four inches taller than me. He was *way* hot. I knew I shouldn't go down this road, but I took off the horn rims I wear around to discourage random interest. The flame-haired, bosomy thing I've got going, silly as it is, tends to act like an advertisement even when it isn't. I inquired hopefully, "You like Renaissance art?"

"I prefer the modern painters. I'm partial to de Kooning, the raw expression of the artist's individual character, not masked by technique." He smiled.

"Not masked by technique? It could use some masking. That stuff's ugly crap!" I cried. Usually I'm more tactful when someone mentions their preference for twentieth century art. I mumble something sympathetic and then try to sell them a canvas stuck in the back of my closet that looks like a Richard Diebenkorn, from the early period, when he was still aping Bonnard. Only an expert with the finest eye could tell them apart.

"You don't approve of the primal energy, the savagely applied pigments, the underlying shiver and delicious terror of sexual compulsion?" he asked. He was looking at my mouth. I felt myself flushing. He saw the color and smiled, the kind of lazy, knowing grin a man gives a woman when he's lying on his back in bed. All my worries faded and I found myself entirely in the moment, and far more stimulated than a few ounces of bourbon could explain.

"I approve of primal energy and sexual compulsion." My voice was husky. What a strange, stimulating conversation! He wasn't just gorgeous, he was interesting—a rare treat in a guy.

He looked away. "Aren't you already struggling with one compulsion?"

"What?" Had I missed something?

"The compulsion to paint. Isn't that why you don't paint anymore?"

"Why I don't paint anymore?" I repeated. "What are you talking about?"
How could he possibly know about my dark past?

"You said you don't paint anymore. Is that perhaps because you wish to recreate of yourself something better, something purer?" His deep voice turned cool, dismissive. I found my hand resting on his arm before I quite knew what I was doing. Hard and muscular, a pleasure to touch. I didn't want to keep touching him, but I couldn't stop myself. Hadn't I sworn off beautiful men? My hand, that slut, wasn't listening to my good sense. It stroked his arm.

Weren't vows made to be broken? Some, anyway.

"What do you know about why I quit painting?" I murmured.

"Your tone was one of regret; your eyes and mouth drooped with longing. I've seen your affect in addicts who have given up their addiction only after a struggle, when someone has been hurt. Your decision to quit painting must have had something to do with an error, perhaps a lapse in self-restraint."

"The error of the material world, a lust for beauty." I grinned, then wiped my other hand across my eyes. So now I was wrestling with myself. With the temptation that was always there. Some part of me longed to use the secret skill, the ability I'd once worked at so long and so hard and with such fierce pride. But people had gotten hurt because of my skill, and that wasn't the woman I wanted to be. So then I had worked just as hard to give her up. Looking away, I felt both a wash of loss and a shiver of pride.

"But aren't we all trying to break free of the siren song of the material realm? The *Bhagavad Gita* says, 'The wise man looks with equal detachment at a lump of dirt, a rock, or a piece of pure gold.'"

"I don't have that kind of detachment," I whispered. "I enjoy the siren song. I'm so drawn in by beauty. I don't think I'd want it any other way!"

"Than to be seduced by beauty you perceive as existing outside yourself?" He smiled a little sadly, and this sudden incomprehensible *tristesse* was as compelling as his confidence. He took my wayward hand with his other one, turned it palm-side-up, and raised it gently to his lips. His mouth on my palm made me shiver. This was the secret erotic place for me. Warm them

and sweet fire burns through my limbs and into my belly. How did this man know that?

“We all want to be seduced,” I said. I felt reckless and took a sip of bourbon to bolster the feeling. I cleared my throat. Was I going to say something invitational? Not after the disaster of my last relationship. Yes. No. My mouth, like my hand, had a mind of its own. “Want to come back to my place and discuss seduction?” I murmured.

He gave me a frank, searching look, the kind that sears you all the way into the lonely messed-up sanctum of your soul, the place where you almost never let anyone peek, because you’re so afraid they’ll see how tainted you are in there. The place where you think you deserve to have a boyfriend who treats you badly, because of all the flaws you can’t hide from yourself. He was looking deeply into my core, and with such a lack of judgment that I shivered again. This time the tremor came with some feeling I couldn’t identify, though it had something to do with self-acceptance. I hadn’t had much of that lately. He said, “I must decline your kind offer. I wouldn’t add you to my list of regrets.”

“I regret your saying no,” I said, wishing I could think of something lighter, more flirtatious. But part of me was relieved, too. Silence spread out between us, thick and viscous and crimson.

An older man in a trench coat passed behind us. I didn’t see his face, only his form, tall and stocky as my dad had been. Or maybe still was. My father, who was my best friend for most of my life, had been missing for five years, since I was twenty-four. It was one more miserable thing to avoid thinking about, along with the recently dumped boyfriend, the stalled dissertation, and being just about flat broke. But this was the worst, the one I tried to prevent from entering my consciousness at all costs. I turned around on my stool, holding the bourbon and watching the old guy. He wasn’t my dad, of course, though I would never have been able to control the impulse to check.

“Sandro Filipepi,” the Italian said, in a musing tone. I turned back to him. He smiled. “Who took his brother’s nickname, Botticelli.”

“You know about him.” I smiled back. “Yes, that was the nickname given to his brother Antonio, who was a goldsmith.”

“No, he took it from Giovanni. He had that kind of relationship with Giovanni. Competitive, complicated. Antonio he protected.”

“I never heard that about those relationships, and I’ve studied him for years! What’s your source?”

“I must have read it somewhere.” The Italian shrugged.

“Really? And what else have you read?” I leaned toward him again, intrigued, and not because he was the hottest man I’d ever met in person. Okay, not only because of that. My thigh rubbed up against his, which was as hard-muscled as his arm.

“He had a rich sense of humor that he used to hide his melancholy. When he told the most jokes, he was the most depressed.”

“Go on.”

“He was, oh, I don’t know. Who knows what I read, it could have been something from a bumper sticker, or a bathroom wall.” He fixed his gaze on me. He was quiet for a few beats during which I swam in those exotic eyes. I felt myself dissolving like sugar in hot water. I couldn’t make out his motives; was he hitting on me, or not? Why was he so connected one moment, but refusing me the next? Quietly, he asked, “What are you looking for?”

“What am I looking for? Redemption, love, adventure, money to pay the rent, my father—”

“In Botticelli.” He waved to Tomar the Israeli bartender and indicated a refill for his mug. Tomar bustled over and swept up the mug, shooting me a glance that seemed a bit alarmed. He’d never seen me get friendly with another customer.

“Right. My thesis.” I pushed my glass away, a spastic gesture. “I’m blocked. Looking for a breakthrough insight. Some way to make Sandro Filipepi, a.k.a. Botticelli, meaningful to modern life.” I smiled. “I’m Don Quixote, taking on an impossible quest.”

“Better than being Dulcinea,” he teased. I grinned back. “Botticelli is special to you,” he said. His fingertips grazed gently over my cheekbone. “Look within yourself. The divine feminine resides within you. It will break the impasse.”

“I don’t think of myself that way,” I said. There was little that was divine in my musty nooks and crannies. Dust balls and mouse droppings, sure. At best, moments of kindness and generosity. Lots of love, well-intentioned but too often errant, for my family, my roommate Fern, a few cousins, and old friends. Although lately, since my father’s disappearance, I’d had a hard time connecting with my mother and brother. Yet another impasse in my life.

His hand remained on my face. “Mythology, then. Stories and legends. Especially the old ones. There are truths in them. Literal truths, figurative truths. Those can spark your inspiration so you can write.” His fingers fluttering over my skin laid down a delicious filigree of molten lava.

“You could help me access my divine feminine.” I couldn’t help making another offer! Might as well go with it, I decided. I smiled and leaned close, nuzzled his cheek with my nose and lips. I breathed him in: amber and oak, pepper and leather, and something else, something sensual and indefinable. I could taste it, him, on my tongue, the rich maleness of him, and I quivered all over. His body twanged like a guitar string. I had a moment of triumph: he wasn’t immune to me after all. He ran his palm along the side of my neck. He took a deep breath and I could feel his chest rise and fall next to mine. “Let yourself...”

“No!” he said forcefully, his voice hoarse. “I’m leaving, before I do something that I’ll regret.” He pushed back from me, jarring me so that I almost fell off my stool. I steadied myself with a hand on the scarred wooden bar. He said, “You don’t know what you’re offering. You, of all people...”

“Me of all people, what?”

He shook his head. “Don’t drink so much. Keep your eyes open, see what’s around you. You have more than just a thesis to write. You have a destiny.” His smoky green-gray eyes were obdurate, and there was high color in his cheeks. Curiously, I wasn’t offended, despite the rejection. I sensed that something was going on that I wasn’t privy to, and that the Italian wanted me despite himself.

I reached into my purse for my wallet. He put his hand on mine. “I’ve got it. Least I can do for a fellow art lover.”

“My name is Laila Cambridge.” I smiled at him. “Look me up.” He nodded and slapped two twenties onto the bar. With a spring in his stride and perfect posture, he left the bar.

That’s when it hit me: why the Italian’s face was so familiar. The *Primavera*. One of Botticelli’s ravishing masterpieces. The yummy Italian looked just like Mercury, the dark-haired youth standing at the far right edge of the painting, scattering fog. I riffled through pages, found the image, and gasped. Botticelli’s Mercury looked uncannily, photographically, like the Italian. The Italian’s hair was shorter, but it was the same color. The features were exactly the same.

I leapt off the barstool and bolted outside, hoping to catch him.

It was a beautiful, crisp spring night in Manhattan, full of sparkling street lights, fresh air breezing in off the Hudson, pedestrians stepping quickly, and laughter swirling up like white blossoms as shoppers walked past windows. He was nowhere to be seen, though he couldn't have gotten far. Standing on the street, I started to laugh, too. I'd never, ever been turned down before. This was a completely novel experience. Intriguing, as the man was. And I'd never had a response like that to anyone, ever. I took a shuddering breath, remembering his touch. Then I laughed some more. I felt lighter and more hopeful than I had in months. I had no reason to feel this way; I simply sensed that things in my life were changing and I was ready.