

The Temptation of Father Lorenzo

Chapter One

Since she couldn't see out of her right eye and had only limited vision in her left, Caterina Rossi had to lean down to little Pietro when the soup kitchen suddenly became very quiet.

"What's going on, Pietro? What happened? Why has everyone stopped talking?"

The boy tugged at his mother's arm. "Father Lorenzo just came in," he whispered. "He looks really mad."

"Why?"

"I dunno. He just looks mad. His face is all red. People look scared."

"Maybe he's sick. Maybe he doesn't feel..."

"Can we keep the line moving, please!" Father Lorenzo suddenly called out. "There are other people waiting to eat. You can talk at your tables."

No one said anything as they went through the line, but they did as he commanded. Normally, the *cucina popolare* off Piazza Santa Croce in Florence was a boisterous place, with more than two hundred people lining up each night for hot Tuscan bean soup and bread, for many their only meal of the day. Until recently, Father Lorenzo often told loud jokes and sang Beatles songs, badly, as he supervised the volunteers.

But in the last weeks everyone noticed that his mood had drastically changed. They worried.

Standing next to Father Lorenzo in the serving line, a volunteer asked, "Everything all right, Father?"

"Yes, Gregorio, everything is all right. Everything is perfectly all right. You've been volunteering here long enough, so you don't have to ask me if everything is all right."

"OK. Sorry, Father."

"And you don't have to be sorry, dammit! Just serve the soup. And I wish you'd get here on time. Can't you see the line is backing up?"

"Yes, Father."

Pietro had guided his mother to the line. Caterina's hands shook as she reached out to take a bowl. "Father..."

Father Lorenzo's face paled. Of all the people who came to the *cucina popolare*, he cared for no one more than Caterina Rossi. Her hair may have been tangled, her clothing threadbare and her shoes frayed, but she always had a smile on her haggard face. Although she was only thirty, she looked at least ten years older.

But those eyes. Unseeing, they were still pools of liquid blue. Father Lorenzo was caught up in them.

His voice softened. "Oh, Caterina. I'm sorry if I was too loud a minute ago. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, but how are you, Father? Pietro says you look angry. Has something happened?"

Father Lorenzo sighed. "No, nothing, Caterina. Don't worry. I'll be all right."

"We wouldn't want something to happen to you, Father."

"Nothing's going to happen, Caterina."

"And you're not leaving us, are you, Father? We'd miss you so much!"

"No, Caterina, I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank God!"

"Now, please, have some soup, OK?"

"Thank you, Father." She took the bowl of bean soup that he placed in her hands. Pietro took his own, picked up a couple of pieces of bread and guided his mother to a table near the front.

Few people saw the priest flee to the tiny storeroom at the end of the hall. It was dark there, and quiet. He leaned against the wall, one hand rubbing his aching head.

“What is the matter with me? What is happening? This isn’t me. I don’t act like this. Not even during the flood I didn’t act like this. Lord, please help me! Please!”

He slid down the wall and sat hunched with his face in his knees. “Have to settle down, have to settle down.”

When he returned, still sweating, to the line fifteen minutes later, Father Lorenzo found that his place had been taken by Brother Andrea, who always found it necessary to lecture each of the diners before filling their bowls. Now he was telling a woman with two little girls that she should have gone to Mass today.

“It will help you lead a better life, a more holy life, and help you bring up your little girls here. Now after you have your soup why don’t you go into the church and say a rosary. The Blessed Mother will help you lead a virtuous life. Will you promise me that?”

“Excuse me, Brother,” Father Lorenzo said. “I’ll take care of this.” He pushed the younger man out of the line and told the woman she should pay no attention to what she had just heard.

The woman smiled, and Father Lorenzo glared at Brother Andrea. “There’s no need to lecture our guests, Andrea. They’ve got enough to worry about.”

“I was just looking after their souls, Father.”

“Well, think of their stomachs before their souls. What the hell do you think we’re here for?”

Brother Andrea suddenly found the need to go to Santa Croce and say the rosary.

But then the priest began muttering to two volunteers. “You’re slowing down again, Veronica. Move a little faster, Benedetta.”

“Working as fast as I can, Father,” Veronica said.

“Then why is the line backed up to the door?”

“It’s moving pretty fast, Father,” Benedetta said.

“No, it’s not!” The priest was no longer whispering, and the room fell silent again. “Jesus Christ, can’t you serve the soup faster? Do I have to do everything around here?”

Throughout the hall, spoons fell on tables as everyone stopped eating. They had never seen Father Lorenzo so angry before, had never heard him raise his voice before, had never heard him take the Lord’s name in vain before.

Slowly, and with Pietro’s help, Caterina got up and approached the serving table. Pietro helped her stand in front of the priest.

“Father,” she began.

“What is it, Caterina?”

“Father, I know this isn’t my place to talk to you like this.”

“Say whatever you want, Caterina. It’s all right.”

“Well, I just can’t stand to know you’re upset like this.”

“Caterina, I’m not upset.”

She ignored him. “Father, you’ve helped me so many times, and I’m grateful for all you’ve done.”

“I just tried to help, Caterina.”

“You found me a place to live after the flood. You helped when Pietro was born and you got us some clothes. You saw to it that that bastard Victorio left for good.”

“He was beating you up.”

“Yes. Every day. And now for the first time in years I feel safe. And Pietro, too. And I’m so grateful. And that’s why I am concerned about you. You’ve never acted like this before. You’ve always been so happy, singing and joking all the time. After the flood, you were the one who held everything in Santa Croce together. This *cucina popolare* was known all over Florence. You even made us rooms upstairs when we didn’t have homes. You were the only one. You were a saint, Father. Everyone said you were a saint!”

“Well, I’m not a saint, Caterina! I’m not a fucking saint!”