

SAINT-GERMAIN

by

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PART I
THE GIFT

Chapter 1

Resurrection

1735

The two men stepped apart, weapons cocked and ready. A light mist still clung to the trees as the Baron's second counted out the paces. The rising sun barely pierced the branches of the surrounding forest. At the count of ten, they turned to face each other, raising pistols to aim. At one end stood the younger of the two men. His heart beat so fast he could barely catch his breath. The pistol wavered in his sweaty palm. Twenty paces away, his opponent's arm held straight and steady. A single shot rang out, shattering the still morning air. A cluster of swallows took flight from nearby elms, vanishing into the lifting fog. The younger man staggered back. The bullet had pierced his chest on the right side. Pain flashed out from the wound like a lightning strike.

He looked down at his chest and saw a hole in his waistcoat no bigger than an olive. 'No!' his brain shouted, '*this cannot be!*' He opened his mouth to scream but only a thin gasp escaped. The man's vision blurred as shock overwhelmed his mind. Unfamiliar noises echoed around him, like sounds heard under water. The pistol slipped from his hand and thumped to the ground.

He lost all strength in his legs next and they gave way beneath him. He collapsed heavily to the ground, a cloud of dirt rising like a sinister aura. Fresh pain lanced his body on impact. He had never experienced pain so intense and all encompassing. Dark, crimson blood soaked the front of his shirt and waistcoat, and then stained the ground beneath him. He touched a hand to his side and it came away dripping in gore.

Oh God, he thought, so much blood, *my blood*. He stared across the field to where the older man stood, a smoking pistol in his hand. He blinked hard to clear his vision. He's laughing at me, the wounded man realized. The bastard is gloating over his victory. How he hated the man, now more than ever. Even with the life draining from him, the hatred remained. But he was powerless to do anything more.

He noticed another man, much younger, running frantically toward him. He was shouting something.

It was a name.

"Francis!"

The wounded man's mind continued to dim and cloud up. It was so difficult to concentrate now. *'That is my name,'* he thought, *'is it not? Damn it all, why can't I think clearly?'*

Thunder rumbled in the distance as a storm approached from the coast. The man stopped beside him and knelt down in the dirt. "Oh, Francis."

I know you, the man realized. The face looked familiar, but it took him a moment to remember. "Alberto," he whispered. The word gurgled in his throat as his right lung filled with blood.

Alberto cradled the wounded man's head in his hands. His cheeks were streaked with tears and he spoke between sobs. "Do not die, Francis. Please don't go."

At that moment, the man realized he was doomed. Some dark part of his mind told him death was near. Already the fiery burn had faded and his limbs had grown cold. His breaths thickly bubbled somewhere deep in his chest, a most disturbing sensation. He had perhaps only seconds to live.

He reached out and grabbed Alberto's coat, staining the bright fabric with his blood. "Luciana," he gasped, "tell her . . . tell her . . . " He had no strength left to finish the sentence. *'I'm sorry,'* he shouted in his mind, but it would not come out. *'Tell her I am sorry!'* He knew Alberto could not read his thoughts. The message was lost. She would never know. *'Oh forgive me Luciana, please forgive me. I will love you forever.'*

He let go of Alberto's coat and his arm dropped to the ground. *'No, no, no,'* he thought, *'I cannot die now, I cannot.'* His brain screamed in frustration but no one could hear his pleas.

Rain started to fall as cold droplets struck his face. He saw Alberto sobbing hysterically, rain joining in with the tears on his cheeks. "No!" Alberto moaned wildly, "Nooo!" He grabbed Francis' shoulders and buried his face in the wounded man's shirt.

All that Francis could manage was a weak smile. *'Don't cry,'* he thought, *'I shall be all right. I do not even feel the pain anymore.'* In fact, his whole body felt rather

numb, and more than a little cold. He shivered once, then relaxed. He could actually feel his heart begin to flutter in his chest. ‘What a curious sensation,’ he thought. He didn’t even feel the need to breathe any longer. Alberto’s weeping faded to a soft murmur. His vision dimmed as heavy eyelids gave way.

‘Is the sky getting dark?’ Francis thought. *‘Tis only morning, is it not? I awoke but an hour ago. Then why am I so sleepy?’* He could no longer feel the ground beneath him. I was as if he floated on a cloud. *‘Perhaps if I rest a bit, just a short nap.’*

He exhaled a soft, last breath and slowly closed his eyes. A clap of thunder drowned out Alberto’s screams.

* * *

Guido kept telling himself he was lucky to be working for the monks. He could be doing much worse things for money. In order to fill their bellies, most of his *paisanos* either were beggars, thieves, or far worse. He was fortunate to work for the brothers, even if it was to prepare corpses for burial. The monks paid him next to nothing for wages, but it was better than going hungry. Scores of people died every week from disease, stabbings, drowning, whatever, so at least it was work he could count on. Sometimes he’d have three or four bodies a day to prepare.

Guido was not an overly religious man. After all, what did the church ever do for him but demand a tithe and give nothing but Latin prayers in return? But touching the dead did make his skin crawl at first. Handling the stiff, cold flesh took getting use to. It also took a while to shake the nervous belief that one of the corpses would someday wake up and grab him. That was Guido’s greatest fear of all, and he still had occasional nightmares about it. But now, after a month or so of handling bodies, he was almost used to it. There was also the added bonus of the female corpses to prepare. Those he didn’t mind at all. The younger ones he’d even take his time with. That is, until the brothers caught him. Then he’d get a good flogging for his sins.

Guido sighed and prepared the lye soap and bowl of water he’d use to wash today’s cadaver. A hard rain tapped away at the small windows near the ceiling of the room. An unusually strong storm had blown in this morning and had not let up all day. The numerous flashes of lightning and the ensuing thunder did little to sooth his nerves. He had to light an oil lamp in order to see what he was doing.

They had brought the man in earlier in the day and placed him in the Duomo's cellar where it was cool, a nobleman from the looks of his fancy clothes. You could tell by the hands too, smooth as a whore's ass. Guido snorted to himself. This chap certainly never shoveled shit from a stable or carried buckets of water from the river. He was surprisingly tanned and muscular though, not pail and flabby like most of the Florentine nobles. But with brown hair and light skin, Guido thought, he ain't from *Toscana*. He looked down between the man's legs and smirked, ain't no Jew either. The dead man was fairly handsome, in a foreign kind of way, with no scars from the pox. This chap's been lucky, Guido thought, and then corrected himself with a chuckle - up until today that is. He overheard the monks saying the man had died in a duel. Guido snorted again. He could care less if the nobles killed each other off completely. It wasn't like any of them ever gave their gold to the poor when they died. No, they just passed it on to the next fat noble in line.

He had stripped the body with the help of Brother Antonio. Guido knew the monk wasn't really helping so much as making sure he didn't try to pocket any of the dead man's valuables. Pocket watch, ivory snuffbox, gold shoe buckles, and several rings were all removed by the monk. Brother Antonio immediately carried off the blood caked garments and would bring the burial clothes when they arrived from the *Palazzo Pitti*. A nobleman for sure, Guido thought, if the chap had been staying at the Grand Duke's palace.

Guido carried the basin over to the body and began to moisten up the large bar of lye soap. The man's right side was an ugly mess. Caked with dried blood from a pistol wound, it would require some scrubbing. But it was at that moment, Guido's greatest fear came to pass. When he touched the wet soap to the man's chest, a flash of lightning lit up the sky outside the cathedral. At the same instant, the corpse on the table gasped in a huge breath of air. It shuddered spastically then grabbed his arm with an icy grip. Thunder shook the Duomo as Guido began to scream.

* * *

The pain in Francis' side returned as he felt his body about him once again. He clenched both hands and let out a piercing scream. As the wail died off, he slowly opened his eyes and waited for his vision to clear. Someone else was screaming as well.

He rolled his head to the side and saw that he held another man's forearm clenched in his hand. The arm was attached to a rail thin peasant, dressed in ragged, filthy clothes. He had greasy black hair and unwashed, olive-colored skin. The peasant tore his arm free and backed away against a stone wall. His face bore an expression of sheer terror.

‘What is happening to me?’ Francis thought. ‘What in God's name is going on?’

He was lying completely naked on a stone table in a small room. The air was cool and the cold table sent a shiver through his body. He tried to move but felt utterly drained of life.

He turned back to the peasant. "Help me," he pleaded. His throat was painfully dry but he continued to speak. "Help me, please."

Instead of helping, the peasant stumbled toward the door. He bolted up some stairs, shouting as he went. Francis recognized the language. It was Italian.

Slowly and carefully, he rolled over onto his side and used his left arm to sit up. The pain in his chest jabbed at him like a thousand knives, but he managed to swing his legs to the floor. He looked down at his right side and saw an ugly, circular wound, caked in a sea of dried blood. Something was embedded in the center of it. He reached over and plucked out a small black object. The resulting pain was so intense he almost fainted, but the object was now in his trembling hand. Slowly, he brought it up before his eyes and blinked to focus.

It was a bullet! Then he really had been shot. It wasn't all a dream. As his mind cleared, the events of the morning gradually came back to him. He had been engaged in a duel with the Baron and . . . was killed? No, he was here now, alive. Or was he? Maybe he was dead. Maybe this was hell!

No, he found it hard to believe hell resembled a dank cellar. Satan was far more creative than that. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. He was such a fool, allowing the Baron to taunt him into a duel. The Bavarian was obviously more experienced in such matters and had even grinned when Francis slapped him across the face. Why didn't he calmly think the consequences through at the time? Francis knew why, it was his blasted Hungarian temper dragging him into trouble again.

He recalled the insults now. Ridiculing his family name, the Baron called them all barbarians, cowards and worse. That had demanded action, immediate action. The

fury boiled in him again. He clenched his fists but the pain quickly reminded him of the consequence. The duel had been foolish. Alberto had tried to dissuade him, but he would not listen. Dear Luciana had tried as well, then became furious when he refused to back down. They were betrothed, but she threatened to end their engagement if he went through with the duel. He tried to explain to them both that it was too late to turn back, it was a matter of family honor.

He met the Baron at dawn in the forests north of Florence, far enough away so the local constabulary would not interfere. Alberto accompanied him as his second. With a broad smirk, the Baron presented his dueling pistols. They were a handsome pair of ivory handled flintlocks he carried in a polished cherry wood case. Francis had been delinquent in his pistol lessons so of course the Bavarian had chosen them over swords. He remembered his palms sweating profusely as they paced apart to the counts of the Baron's second; ten steps, turn and aim. Then came the shot.

'Enough!' he thought, 'if the bullet did not kill me, I shall surely freeze to death unless I leave this place.'

He gathered up all his strength and attempted to walk. Placing both feet on the cold floor, he shivered again.

Where the devil are my clothes? he wondered. The embarrassment of being naked was secondary to getting someone to help him.

Pushing off the table, he placed all weight on his feet. His legs immediately gave way beneath him and he collapsed to the stone floor. He cried out again as more pain ricocheted through his weakened body. Thankfully, voices arose in the stairs above and two men appeared in the doorway. One was the same dirty peasant from before and the other bore the shaved head and long brown robes of a Benedictine monk.

The brother gasped and ran to his side. "God in heaven! Signor Rakoczi, you are alive!"

The monk quickly helped him up to the table once again. He shouted orders at the peasant. "Run quickly, get some blankets and wine."

Guido left and returned shortly with the objects. They wrapped him tightly in a scratchy wool blanket and brought the wine bottle to his lips. Rakoczi realized his mouth was parched and gulped down the dark liquid. He choked on the last sip, spilling wine

down his chin and neck.

The monk helped him stand. "I am Brother Antonio. Come, let us go upstairs. This is no place for the living."

Slowly, they helped him up the narrow stone staircase. At the top, the trio entered a small room off the north apse of the Duomo. Rakoczi caught a brief glimpse of the massive nave beyond the door.

What the devil am I doing in the cathedral? he wondered. How on earth did I get here?

Another monk met them and took Guido's place. They laid him down on a small cot and wrapped a second blanket around him.

Brother Antonio turned to the other monk. "Quickly, bring the royal surgeon, and alert the Medici as well."

The brother nodded and hurried away. Rakoczi shivered under the blankets. He had never felt so cold in all his life. It was as if his very bones had turned to ice. He reached out and grabbed the monk's robes. "What has happened to me? Why am I here?"

The monk blessed himself with the sign of the cross before answering. "Do you not remember? You were killed this morning, Signor. You have been dead for over half a day!"

Rakoczi shook his head. "Nay, that is impossible. I was not dead, I was . . ." His words faded away as he couldn't remember what had happened. He recalled the duel, and lying on the ground with Alberto, then . . . then what?

The monk patted his shoulder gently. "Rest now, my son. There will be plenty of time to talk later."

Rakoczi was too tired to argue. He nodded and closed his eyes. He felt absolutely drained of energy.

It did not take long before sleep overtook him. He began to dream almost instantly, but it was less than pleasant. The quiet cathedral was replaced with a grey, barren landscape. It was a rocky, featureless place except for a few long dead trees. The sky was a flat ceiling of ash grey clouds. There was something else here though, scores of people. They stretched to the horizon, men and women, children and old people. And as

he looked about, they became aware of his presence. Slowly they began to turn to him, all with outstretched arms and gaping mouths. Then to his horror, they began to step towards him, a wave of wandering humanity. Their faces were blank and pallid, the color and smell of death. They crushed in on him, pressing him to the point where he could barely breathe. Dozens of hands grabbed at his clothing, tugging at his arms. Pleading eyes were locked onto his no matter where he turned. They were pathetically hollow and without hope. No one spoke, but their thoughts filled his mind, begging for help, asking for deliverance.

“Help me! Help me! Help me!”

“No!” Rakoczi screamed. “Leave me alone, I cannot help you!” He managed to pull a few hands off his clothing only to have dozens more reach out and grab hold. Their fingers were stiff and cold and he felt nauseated just touching the corpse-like flesh. He searched the horizon and saw hundreds more, all stumbling towards him like some army of macabre sleepwalkers. Somehow, he knew they were all dead and, worse still, beyond hope. He searched about for help, but nothing looked familiar.

Rakoczi plunged through the crowd until it began to thin out, then he broke into a run. He distanced himself from the mass of bodies, but the rocky ground beneath his feet caused him to stumble frequently. The sound of his own footfalls seemed to stop in midair without echo. The atmosphere itself seemed stagnant and odorless. Where in creation was he? Where were the red roofs and green trees of Florence? Without warning, a solitary figure appeared in his path. Rakoczi slowed to a walk, grateful for a chance to catch his breath. Perhaps this person could help him find the way to Florence. As he drew closer, he recognized the man instantly. It was his father!

“No!” Rakoczi screamed and sat bolt upright. The wound in his side shouted back with pain and he crumpled over onto the cot. A layer of clammy sweat coated his skin from head to feet. He glanced around the small room, finally remembering where he was. A solitary monk sat on a stool by the door, his hood pulled up over his head. Strangely, he seemed unconcerned by his outburst. Rakoczi could see only a small portion of the face beneath the hood, a square chin with a neatly trimmed black beard.

That's odd, Rakoczi thought, he didn't think the Benedictines were allowed facial hair.

"It is all right," the monk said finally, "they will not harm you."

"What?" Rakoczi asked, his breathing returning to normal. "What are you talking about?"

"You have journeyed to the other side . . . and returned."

Rakoczi frowned. "The other side? The other side of what?"

The monk did not answer the question. "They are lost souls attracted to your living spirit."

He was talking about his dream. But how could he possibly know about that?

"Rest now," the brother said.

"No," Rakoczi returned, the last thing he wanted to do was sleep again. "How do you know what I dreamt?"

The monk placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and helped him lie back down. "Rest."

Rakoczi found he could not resist. The strange monk's words were like a soft lullaby. He felt his eyelids grow heavy. "Who are you?" he asked. He realized the monk spoke without an Italian accent.

"A friend," was the only response.

Rakoczi was asleep within seconds. Thankfully, the nightmare did not return.

He was not sure how long he slept, but the sound of the door opening awakened him. The first monk, the one who had helped him up the stairs, sat beside him again, a worn rosary clenched between weathered hands. A stocky gentleman, dressed in an expensive sky blue coat and powdered wig, stood in the doorway. His eyes widened in surprise at the sight on the cot. "Tis true then, you are not dead."

Rakoczi half smiled. "Good to see you *doctore*. Pray tell me what has happened."

The ducal surgeon centered the small room. "You lost a duel with Baron Felkenheim this morning. You were shot in the upper right torso and expired soon afterwards. I examined your body myself. You were not breathing, your heart was silent, your skin was cold."

"But I am here now," Rakoczi countered, "alive and warm."

"Tis a miracle from our Lord God," the monk intoned, eyes looking skyward. "Truly a miracle of God."

The surgeon smirked at the monk's words and approached the cot. He first placed a hand on Rakoczi's forehead, then an ear to his chest. Finally he lifted the blanket to look at the wound. Rakoczi opened his hand and revealed the bullet. "Looking for this?"

The surgeon frowned at the object, and then examined the wound closer. After a few moments, he placed the blanket back down. "Remarkable, your heart is strong, your breathing is shallow but steady, and the wound, the wound is healing!" He turned to the monk, "Did you do anything?"

The brother shook his head. "Only prayers. Many, many prayers."

The surgeon looked down at the young man on the cot. "Never have I encountered such a thing. What do you recall?"

Rakoczi furrowed his brow as he tried to remember any details of those missing hours. There were fleeting images but he could not hold onto them long enough to form a complete picture. He shook his head in frustration. "Nothing. Tis all still cloudy to me. Am I going to live?"

"Why yes," the surgeon returned, "as far as I can tell you are going to be just fine. You have a fever from the wound, but that should pass. I see no reason to bleed you considering the amount of blood you have already lost."

Aside from being exhausted and quite sore, Rakoczi did feel fairly well. He had never been shot before, but was reasonably certain that feeling this good was not a symptom. If they were correct and he had in fact been dead, then something truly extraordinary had happened to him today. However, he refused to believe in something as superstitious as a divine miracle. "I pray *doctore*, this diagnosis is more accurate than your last."

The surgeon's face turned pink at the insult. "I promise you, you shall be fighting duels again soon enough. Perhaps you too can get it right next time." Without waiting for a response, the surgeon stood and turned to the monk. "Give him plenty to drink. A hot meat broth would be best. And keep him warm." He looked back at Rakoczi. "I will come to the *Palazzo* and check on you later. Stay in bed until then and *do not* attempt to

walk before I tell you. Take some wine for the pain and to help you sleep."

Before the surgeon could leave, the door flew open once again, banging into the wall behind it. A portly young man stood in the doorway this time, leaning heavily against the frame. Alberto puffed loudly, having run all the way from his home to the Duomo. Unaccustomed to exercise of any kind, glistening channels of sweat ran from the white peruke on his head to his two flushed cheeks.

Even in mourning, Alberto was flamboyantly overdressed. His black coat and waistcoat were trimmed with wide swirls of gold embroidery. An overly lacy shirt positively exploded from his wrists and neckline. Buttons of gold strained to keep his waistcoat stretched across his protruding stomach. Wide, bejeweled rings sat on every plump finger. Far be it from Alberto to let a friend's demise keep him from making a *Firenze* fashion statement.

"My God you *are* alive! When they told me, I did not dare believe it." He stumbled dumbfounded into the room, collapsing beside the cot. Tears of joy filled his eyes as he hugged his friend tightly.

Pain shot out from the wound and Rakoczi winced. "Careful Alberto!"

His friend immediately released him. "Oh! Oh I am so sorry. Please forgive me. What was I thinking? Of course it hurts. You have been shot. Alas, what a fool I am." He picked up one of Rakoczi's hands and kissed it repeatedly.

Francis couldn't help but smile at his friend's display of affection. Like Rakoczi, Alberto Strozzi came from a wealthy, noble family; his father being a distant cousin of the ruling Medici. Unfortunately, that also gave him the protruding nose and wide lips of that rather peculiar bloodline. They had been tutored together as youths, followed by mutual study at the *Universita di Siena*. "Tis good to see you my friend."

Alberto looked up and mistook the meaning of Rakoczi's smile. His expression turned to ire as he pushed away the kiss-covered hand. "*Diavolo!* Don't you ever do this to me again!"

"What?" Rakoczi asked. He was confused by his friend's sudden change in behavior.

"You know what I speak of. Leading us all to believe you were dead. Putting us through such pain and sorrow." He shook an accusatory finger at his friend. "This is just

the type of ridiculous stunt you do for the thrill of it, never thinking about how much it hurts those that love you."

Rakoczi shook his head. "Alberto, this time I wish to God it was a ruse. But you were there. You saw me fall victim to the Baron. Plus the *doctore* says I was quite . . ." He refused to think of the possibility, let alone say it. "Gone. Look for yourself." He lifted the blanket and showed his friend both his wound and the bullet.

Alberto's face immediately softened. "*Dios mio*. Oh Francis, I am sorry. I did not mean to doubt you. It is just that you are always causing frays and getting into trouble. How was I to know the difference this time?"

Rakoczi shook his head again. "Do not apologize my friend. You were right. I was a fool to let the Baron coax me into a duel. I should have listened."

"You were defending your family's honor and I envy you for that." He looked away, ashamed of his own meekness. "I certainly would not have had such courage."

Rakoczi patted his friend's shoulder. "No, you did the proper thing. You tried to dissuade me." He looked away regretfully, "So did Luciana. Alas, I should have listened to you both. Once again I let my temper rule my brain and paid a heavy price for it this time, nearly the ultimate price." He stared down at the black bullet in his hand, then squeezed his fist around it. "But it appears that whatever power rules the heavens has given me another chance. I only pray Luciana will do the same.

Alberto's face soured at the conversation's turn to Rakoczi's fiancée. "Do not worry, I am sure she still loves you. She was as devastated as I when she heard of your death. She spent all morning in the chapel."

"Did she?" Rakoczi leaned forward and grabbed his friend's arm. "You must get a message to her. Tell her she was right, tell her I am sorry."

For a brief instant, Alberto's face betrayed a glint of jealousy. "*Si, si*. I will send a message to the Villa Multonaci. I am sure she will be ecstatic to learn of your recovery."

Rakoczi lay back and relaxed. "Good, *gracie* my friend. She must have been in a terrible state."

"We *all* were," Alberto reminded him.

Rakoczi was too lost in his own thoughts to take notice of his friend's remark. "I

only pray she will forgive me."

Alberto stood up and flattened out the wrinkles in his waistcoat. "Yes well, you never know with the female gender, do you? They are much less reliable than a good man." Alberto steered the conversation away from the topic of Luciana. "So pray tell me, if you really did die in my arms this morning. What happened next? What do you remember?"

Rakoczi looked at the others. The monk and the surgeon both leaned closer to hear the answer. He realized he would be asked that question a hundred times in the days to come. "I am not really sure. I don't have a clear recollection of any one thing. The other monk said I had been to the other side, whatever that meant."

"What other monk?" Brother Antonio asked.

"The one who was here when I woke the first time."

The brother shook his head. "There was no other monk. I was by your side the entire time."

Rakoczi felt a cold shiver pass up his spine. "But he was sitting right where you are. I spoke with him."

"You must have dreamt it, Signor. I swear to you I was here the entire time, reciting the Rosary to our Blessed Mother."

Rakoczi rubbed his eyes in confusion. It certainly didn't seem like a dream. And that nightmare felt real enough. What ever happened to him, he was damn well going to find out the truth. "Perhaps after I am rested I will remember the details better."

"Of course," Alberto added. "The Grand Duke is sending a carriage to take you back to the *Palazzo Pitti*."

"I will require some garments too, please." Rakoczi lifted the blanket. "As you can see, they were preparing me to leave this world exactly as I came into it."