

JO GRAHAM



THE
BORGIA
DOVE



Praise for *The Borgia Dove*

I relished every word of *Borgia Dove*. Jo Graham paints these larger-than-life characters in a gloriously dynamic mural with grace and wit.

— Sherwood Smith, creator of the Sartorias-deles universe,
Nebula award finalist

Passion, intrigue, politics, and a papal election, all portrayed with Graham's trademark historical flair. I was planning to read this one slowly to savor every beautifully-chosen detail, but ended up finishing it in two days—I couldn't put it down.

— Melissa Scott, legendary pioneering SFF author
and winner of multiple genre awards

An insightful meditation on the rare alignment of true love and pure ambition—no one writes the Borgias like Jo Graham.

— E. K. Johnston, #1 New York Times bestselling author

The Borgia Dove is a very sensual and sensuous book // Not just sexual and carnal pleasures, mind you, but the entire world is brought alive with all the senses in mind. // Graham's *The Borgia Dove* brings us into Giulia's world, life, passions and desires in a fully immersive way.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer
and Hugo award finalist

The Borgia Dove is an intelligent, action-packed fantasy of vivid characters and well-researched history, filled with so much life

I know I won't be able to read about Rome in this era now without hearing Giulia's voice and seeing it through her eyes.

— K.V. Johansen, author of *Gods of the Caravan Road*

Praise for *A Blackened Mirror*

Graham (*Black Ships*) recalls the legacy of Taylor Caldwell and Mary Renault in this smart series launch, humanizing history from the perspective of deeply imagined, unironically presented characters. //...this slow-building introduction to complex intrigue will please readers looking for vivid historical fare with just a touch of magic.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Ancient Greek and Roman rituals lie like a palimpsest beneath the streets of a Rome resplendent in full Catholic regalia in this tale of ambition, desire, intrigue and enchantment. La Bella Farnese is a compelling heroine, and author Jo Graham casts her Renaissance spell with a deft hand.

— Jacqueline Carey, award-winning author
of the *Kushiel Universe* series

An addictively rich, vivid and lushly written Renaissance fantasy // Jo Graham's writing style is beautiful, as always, and her story-telling is utterly compulsive from beginning to end.

— Stephanie Burgis, author of
Masks and Shadows and *Snowspelled*

Once again, Graham proves herself a master of historical fantasy—this time, the Italian Renaissance, portrayed in all its glorious complexity. Giulia Farnese is the ideal protagonist, ardent, ambitious, sharp of wit and tongue, willing to risk

everything. I devoured the book, and cannot wait for the rest of the series.

— Melissa Scott, legendary pioneering SFF author
and winner of multiple genre awards

Jo Graham returns to magical history with a fresh take on some of Rome's most notorious. Witty and loving, with sharp edges in all the right places.

— E.K. Johnston, #1 New York Times bestselling author

Jo Graham skillfully brings life in Renaissance Rome and Italy to life... // It is a highly enjoyable read, perfect for those who want to get to grips with the skullduggery of life in Renaissance Rome and the Curia.

— Dr. Katharine Fellows, Oxford University, author of
“Diplomacy, Debauchery and Devils:
the ecclesiastical career of Rodrigo Borgia”

Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* showcases the breadth of her writing talents... // Graham gives us a fresh and underappreciated perspective on the life and times of late 15th century Rome, with a strong heroine, rich worldbuilding and language; clever, refined and immersibly readable.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

Vivid characters, especially the charming and indomitable young Giulia Farnese herself, bring to life a story of conspiracy, intrigue, and Renaissance magic—Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* is a wonderful adventure.

— K.V. Johansen, author of the
Gods of the Caravan Road epic fantasy series

Also by Jo Graham (selected works):

Black Ships

Stealing Fire

The Order of the Air (series, Melissa Scott co-author)

The Calpurnian Wars

Sounding Dark

Warlady

Fortune's Favor

Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl

A Blackened Mirror

The Borgia Dove

THE BORGLA DOVE

Being the Second Part of
the Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl

Jo Graham



First edition published 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Jo Graham

All rights reserved.

Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright act of 1976,
no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted
in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system,
without the prior written permission of the editor and publisher.

Please respect authors' rights: don't pirate.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons,
living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information, address

Athena Andreadis

Candlemark & Gleam LLC,

38 Rice Street #2, Cambridge, MA 02140

eloi@candlemarkandgleam.com

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

In Progress

ISBNs: 978-1-952456-24-4 (paperback), 978-1-952456-25-1 (ebook)

Cover art by Alexael

Editor: Athena Andreadis

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

In memory of my daughter, Ashlee
1999-2023
Love is the thing that never ends.

There is written, her fair neck round about:

Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,

And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

—Thomas Wyatt

Chapter One

Why does no one tell tales of what happened to Proserpina after she became Death's bride? Is it that she is no longer interesting once she is not a virgin? I would think that being the wife of a god would be worth a story.

I am neither virago nor virgin nor victim, so perhaps that renders me uninteresting as well. I am the consort of one of the most powerful men in the Christian world, and I have worked hard for it. *We* have worked hard for it despite all perils. I love my family, my friends, my God and my lover, though sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between the last two.

If you would like a cautionary tale of suffering, my just desserts for my wayward acts, this is not the story you want. If you want to hear how we triumphed against a world set against us, against dagger and dark magic alike, read on.



It was a lovely day, the ninth day of June in the Year of Our Lord 1492. I sat at a little table on the balcony of my room, looking out across the city of Rome, across tiled roofs and gardens and streets, to the tower of St. Peter's Basilica against the sky. And tried not to gag.

Maria, our housekeeper, stood in the doorway with a packet

of papers in her hand. “Donna Giulia, I swear by day-old bread. Just a little of it; moisten it in your mouth and swallow a little at a time.”

I looked down at the hunk of bread in my hand. It ought to be appetizing. Something ought to be. “My mother writes that I’ll be done with this in a week or so.” Cold sweat stood on my forehead despite the warm day.

“Your mother knows best,” Maria said. “Young women carry most like their mothers.”

“She had six,” I said. “She ought to know.” I looked resolutely out over the city as I put a piece of bread the size of my thumbnail in my mouth. “It will be over soon. And then I’ll feel perfectly well. That’s what she says.”

I had missed my courses at the end of March and then again in April. By May it was clear that there would be a child, a not unexpected result of having had a lover for nearly two years. Indeed, the only question was why it had taken so long. Rodrigo did not seem to lack virility for all that he was much older than I. Certainly he had sired many children in the past, but one could expect him to slow down somewhat. Well, anyone could but he. Now that I was clearly gravid, he strutted around like the Borgia Bull in truth.

“I expect you will, Donna Giulia,” Maria said. “I’ve brought a packet of letters up from the door guards. There are several for you.” She put them on the table.

“Thank you, Maria,” I said. “Would you mind bringing me pen and ink out here?”

“Not at all. You stay still.” She went back into my camera while I opened the first of the four letters. It was a lengthy and overly polite letter from the aunt of someone my brother Alessandro had known at the university, extolling the thrift, punctuality, and honesty of her nephew who earnestly sought a position doing accounts in the Vatican if I would be so kind as to speak to the

Vice-Chancellor on his behalf.

I read it twice. I had never heard of the young man. I shook my head and put it aside to ask Alessandro about. Perhaps he had some idea if he was as honest and thrifty as advertised. Given that I had never met the woman or even heard of her nephew, I was not about to extend patronage to someone who might be a wastrel or a maniac.

Maria brought the ink and paper while I read the second. "Another bite, Donna Giulia." I glanced down at the bread. I had taken a bite and swallowed it without incident. I took another hopefully and read the second letter.

This one was even more perplexing, as it came from a man I had never met who stated that he had written a series of Petrarchan sonnets that he wished printed, and begged that he might be allowed to dedicate them to my lovely person. (And that I should pick up part of the printing costs, as a good patroness should.) It was at least easy to answer. I would like very much to read some of the sonnets before I decided whether to assist in their publication. I wrote it out, short and flowery, in very polite language without adding "And only an idiot buys a pig sight unseen." That was not how a lady corresponded.

The third letter made me smile, and I broke the seal on it with pleasure. *My dear Giulia*, it read, *I shall be hosting a little garden revelry on Saturday the 16th from dusk until whenever we're tired of it, with dancers and that sweet boy who plays the lute, Becchio or whatever his name is. It won't be half the city, my dearest, just a few close friends who will appreciate a rustic scene such as nymphs and dryads and shepherds and all sorts of rustic things.*

I reread that last sentence twice. It did seem to trip over itself.

I would be incomprehensibly pleased if the two of you would honor my little abode! I know you're breeding and have no taste for lamb, or ram either, but you could just drop in and sample the savories! All my love, Fiammetta.

It was certainly incomprehensible why her pleasure would be incomprehensible, and whether I had any taste for ram or not at present was not something I was about to discuss with Fiammetta. Pleasant company as she was, her discretion was not all that one might desire. And I wasn't about to let Rodrigo loose among the lambs under the circumstances. Still, if we dropped in early, her gatherings were always pleasant, and I did consider her a friend. Fiammetta was one of foremost courtesans in Rome, and she had welcomed me to her sisterhood warmly. I picked up a reed pen and dipped it to answer.

Dearest Fiammetta, thank you so for the lovely invitation! We will try to come. I hope I shall not be indisposed, but of course I cannot guess so far in advance. You know how it is. A hundred kisses, Giulia.

I did not have wax out here, so I simply folded it and put it aside, stretching like a cat in the sun. The bread did seem to be staying down. I tried a third piece.

The last letter was addressed in a familiar, flowing hand, and I broke the seal and unfolded it, a stiffer outer sheet over the inner, since it had come all the way from Florence.

Most Generous and Beautiful Lady, it read, Once more I prostrate myself at your feet and pledge my undying affection for your interests. I write to you this 29th day of May in hopes of finding you well. I am very well myself, except for a certain pain in my knee where I twisted it, though that is of no concern to you, nor bears upon the subject of my letter.

Dionisio Treschi was a dear and true friend, but he did take time to come to the point.

A very curious thing has come to my notice, and I bring it to yours. The other day a young gentleman recently come from Spain, whom I will call by his forename Mois, was introduced to me by a friend. He had escaped Granada, he said, with his two young sisters, having no idea if others of his family survived. He had brought with him certain valuable books the sale of which he hoped would provide enough money for him and his sisters to settle in some welcoming city.

Mois had heard that my old Maestro, Pico della Mirandola, was a scholar who would appreciate the books. However, as I have written to you before, della Mirandola has renounced all such studies and now attends only to the words of Friar Savonarola, even to the extent of burning his own works! Needless to say, I dissuaded Mois from taking these rare and possibly only copies of ancient texts to him! I am an honest man, Donna Giulia. I could not say that they were worth less than they are.

I raised an eyebrow. Dionisio could be excitable, but he did not tend to exaggerate to this degree.

They are very nearly priceless. I could not put a figure upon them. I told Mois so. His face fell, and he said that his sisters could not eat them. I said that I knew of a gentleman (and I did not name him!) who was both fabulously wealthy and who would appreciate these works and care for them as they deserve. If Mois wished it, I would contact a patron who could serve as agent for this most worthy gentleman. He agreed that would be best. And so it is with this in my mind that I write to you.

“But what are the books, Dionisio?” I said under my breath. “You have built up. Now tell me.”

I hope that you will bring this matter to the attention of the august gentleman in question. One of them is written in the language of the Jews, of which I read but a limited amount. Mois says it is a writing on the nature of the universe, a Cabbalistic manuscript some two hundred years old. The other—Donna Giulia, I hardly know how to begin! The manuscript is very old, a scroll rather than a book. It is brittle. I did not dare to unwrap it far without recourse to a scriptorium and the best scribes who are accustomed to such old books. It appears at a guess to be a thousand years old or thereabouts, and to be a transcription made for the Roman Emperor Julian of the oracles of the Erythraean Sibyl.

I put the letter down and looked at it, putting the hunk of bread next to it on the table. “Really, Dionisio?”

When I saw it, I knew of its great worth, whether or not it is what it purports to be, simply based upon its age, its historical value and its condition. However, if it is the prophecies of the Erythraean Sibyl, a lost

work from antiquity which is greatly to be desired, it is priceless. Madonna, I know of no one except the worthy gentleman you serve who could afford such a thing and who would care for it and conserve it. Friar Savonarola would see it on the fire, and he is not the only one. I beg of you, write to me in the affirmative so I may further this transaction to the good of all. Your loyal and loving servant, Dionisio Treschi.

I read the letter a second time. Then I reached for pen and ink. "Of course, Dionisio," I murmured. "What else would I say?" I had nearly finished my reply when Lucrezia came out. She wore a pink gown that complimented her coloring perfectly and was unconcernedly eating a small salami. I nearly retched. I could smell the salami from halfway across the balcony.

"Oh, sorry," Lucrezia said, hiding it behind her back.

"That doesn't help," I said.

"I'm sorry! I'll be right back!" She dashed back in the house to return without it a few moments later.

"I hope you haven't left that in my room," I said.

She went back in and was several minutes this time before she returned. "I forgot," she said. "Why does the baby hate salami?"

"The baby doesn't. Everything makes me ill right now. My mother says I'll feel better soon."

She slid into the other chair at the table. "My mother says she was never sick a day with me."

"Your mother is very fortunate," I said. I did wish Lucrezia had some judgment about telling everybody everything about everybody else. While Vannoza and I were certainly on speaking terms, I wasn't certain that I wanted my lover's former mistress of many years to hear every detail of my pregnancy.

Lucrezia glanced down at the letter from Dionisio. "What's this about?"

"My friend Dr. Treschi, who you may remember, is acting as agent for some valuable manuscripts he wants to sell your father," I said. Presumably Lucrezia did remember, as the events had been

quite dramatic.

She looked up at me. "The man who conjures angels?"

"Yes," I said.

"Though it was you, wasn't it? Who actually called him?"

Lucrezia inclined her head to the side.

"It was," I said. There was something that had bothered me at the time, but it had gotten lost in the chaos that night, and then Lucrezia had gone to the country with her mother and then it had been months later and it seemed pointless to bring it up. But now she had. "Did you truly see it?"

"Oh yes." She smiled. "The angel was beautiful. Just like a church window, all gold and light. It was quite amazing. Father says he didn't see it though."

I bit my lip. I wasn't certain what I'd seen, but I had definitely seen something. I had asked Rodrigo if he had seen anything as well. He had hesitated and then replied, "No, but I believe you did." That was the sort of answer that made one drop the question. And yet Lucrezia was perfectly matter-of-fact. "Are you going to call angels again?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "I can't do things like that anymore."

"Because Papa forbids it?"

I shook my head. "I was what is called a Dove. That's a young woman who can see things in mirrors or be spoken to by spirits. But I am not anymore."

"Why not?" Lucrezia said curiously.

I put my hand over my belly. "My love, I'm not a virgin."

Her face wrinkled. "You have to be a virgin?"

"That is what I was taught," I said.

"That's stupid," Lucrezia said. "Men don't have to stop doing things if they fuck."

"Lucrezia, language!" I said. "Polite. Refined. Also men can't be Doves in the first place, so they're not losing anything."

Lucrezia sat up in her chair, folding her hands in front of her

very precisely. “So virgins have all the ecstatic visions and talk to angels but can’t be priests or cardinals. They can only be martyrs. Because being a martyr would be so much better!”

“My darling, I don’t make the rules.”

“I’m going to tell Papa that he needs to change that when he’s pope,” Lucrezia said.

“I don’t think the pope makes the rules either,” I said. “And it is far from certain that your father will be pope.”

“My father changes every rule. Or breaks it,” she said proudly. Which I couldn’t argue with. It was not universally true, but it was certainly mostly true. He questioned everything as Lucrezia did, only with decades more experience and to better effect. No doubt at her age he’d been a holy terror. Lucrezia leaned against the rail. “If he were pope, would you still be together?”

“I certainly hope so,” I said. At the very least there would be difficulties. Now we lived four blocks apart. Either I was at his house or he at mine nearly every day. It was a peculiar sort of domesticity, but it worked. How it would be managed if he lived in the Vatican, I wasn’t sure.

“That was the thing Papa and Mama quarreled about,” Lucrezia said matter-of-factly. “She says that she had no intention of being with someone she rarely saw who just dropped in stealthily to get it done. Carlo lives with her and they’re together every day. She said she was never going to be a man’s dirty secret when she didn’t even have the man, and she’d have to be if he was pope.”

“Lucrezia, your mother would not appreciate you telling me these things,” I said. “You must learn discretion.” I had guessed as much but didn’t like to think about it. There would be some way to manage, surely.

“There must be something good about Papa being pope,” Lucrezia said thoughtfully.

“Well, if he were pope, perhaps he could get Dr. Treschi out of trouble,” I said, picking up the letter. “His maestro is charged

with heresy and Dionisio is skirting charges himself. He would be in a great deal of trouble over the evening we were speaking of, if anyone knew of it.”

“But it was to save Papa’s life!” Lucrezia said. “And besides, Papa knows and he’s a cardinal, so how does the Church not know?”

“Because your Papa knows how to keep his mouth shut,” I said. “A lesson you could learn, Lucrezia. You don’t have to say everything you know.”

She sighed dramatically. “You keep saying that.” She looked at me critically. “Don’t you miss it? Being a Dove?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “But I do not wish I were still a young maiden. I have traded one kind of power for another, as one does as one gets older. I would not like to be a holy virgin or a sister in a convent. I like my life.”

“You have power?” Lucrezia put her head to the side.

“There are many kinds of power,” I said. “And not all of them come with a title.” I gestured to the letter. “I have the power to help my friend and his friends who need the books sold. That’s important. And I hope I have the power to help your father’s cause.”

“How?”

“By cleverness and diplomacy. By connections and wit,” I said. “There is an entire world that men barely realize exists, but the world of women moves all things beneath the surface.”

“Like the queen on the chessboard,” Lucrezia said.

“Your brothers can’t play in that world, and I can. You will when you are old enough. It’s not all swords and crowns and miters. Your father needs to sweep both boards to win.”

“I don’t understand what you can do that Cesare can’t.”

I sighed. “Cesare can never make the weak move.” Her head tilted quizzically. “You know in chess sometimes you have to make a weak move to set up the board as you wish. Not every move can be aggressive. You can’t attack unceasingly. You have to arrange

your pieces with care, and sometimes that means not responding to a feint or withdrawing to a better position. Cesare is a young nobleman. Honor requires that he demand or threaten. He must always attack, never maneuver. He cannot conciliate or negotiate without appearing weak. I can. I can make the weak moves on your father's behalf because I am a woman and not subject to the requirements of a nobleman's honor. Your father will use us each according to our best purpose, just like pieces on the chessboard." I smiled at Lucrezia. "You will play on the board as I do before long. Ours is not the lesser board, my love."

She smiled, a perfect pink bow of lips that was the same expression as her father at his sneakiest. "I can't wait," she said.



Rodrigo arrived as Vespers rang, so we were four for dinner. Two years ago, when Adriana's son, my nominal husband, had been given the estate at Vasanello, she had moved from her suite to her late husband's larger one next door, so I had the rooms which had originally been hers. They were smaller than hers, but they had the balcony that I loved. We dined in Adriana's sala, Adriana and Rodrigo at the ends of the table and me and Lucrezia on the long sides, a very congenial party.

As usual, Silvia, our cook, presented a lovely meal, fettuccine in a cream sauce with new peas and Romano cheese, and a chicken fragrant with garlic and butter. It looked delicious. Unfortunately I was eating only the noodles, with a little butter to keep them from sticking together. My plate was very sad. Yet I knew better than to gorge on cream sauces and garlic that would simply make me sick.

Lucrezia was now a day student at a convent school for young ladies of good birth and returned home each day full of stories of her friends and their very mild adventures. I only envied her the opportunity a little bit. There had certainly been no schools for

young ladies in Montalto, and when I was only slightly older I had lost my father and his care.

I had tutors now. Four days a week I gave my mornings over to the study of Latin, Greek, history, philosophy and theology, and was diligent in my studies. I had to run to catch up in this household. Rodrigo had graduated from the University of Valencia and then taken a law degree at Bologna. He had a library of more than three hundred books and had learned whatever he wished for decades. If there was any study I truly desired, I had only to ask, but there were gaping holes in my education.

I waited until Lucrezia had finished another amusing anecdote before I put in, “Rodrigo, who was the Erythraean Sibyl? And how were her oracles lost? I know of the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, but I do not know the others.”

He leaned back in his carved chair. “She was a prophetess in Ionia long ago—or rather a series of prophetesses, generations of women who claimed divine inspiration for their words. There was a shrine at a town named Erythrae supposedly from the time of the Trojan War.” The candlelight glinted off his ruby cardinal’s ring as he reached for his wineglass. “In ancient days there were eight sibyls, or perhaps ten, depending on which author was counting, who conveyed the words of the gods to men.”

“And which god did she speak for?” I asked. “Apollo, as the sibyl at Delphi did?”

“Presumably,” he said. “At least in later times. Though like Pythian Apollo, she may have originally spoken for the gods of the underworld.” He gave me a little smile. “Persephone and Hades, whom we call Proserpina and Pluto.”

I felt a chill at my back. I had once gone into a tomb and asked a favor of Proserpina, and he knew where it had led me: to him. “From the time of the Trojan War?” I said.

“Everyone always says everything happened from the time of the Trojan War,” Rodrigo said. “Who’s to know? But certainly

it was a very old shrine in Herodotus' day. When the temple of Jupiter here in Rome burned in 83 BC, the prophecies of the Sibyl of Cumae that were there were destroyed, so the Roman Senate sent agents to other sibyls offering enormous sums of money for their books or to make copies of them. They brought back a copy of the prophecies of the Erythraean Sibyl, among others." He lifted his glass, looking at me over the gilded rim. "For more than four hundred years they were consulted by the Senate and Emperors alike until they were destroyed."

"Why were they destroyed, Papa?" Lucrezia asked.

"In a fit of overzealousness, like so many lost works," Rodrigo said. "Some of our Church Fathers believed that such pagan writings led people away from Christ. Or perhaps it was politically expedient at the time to be rid of writings that, if they had any accuracy, proclaimed the coming downfall of the Western Roman Empire." He took a sip, then put the glass down. "It's the same argument as today. Does ancient wisdom lead us to folly and should thus be suppressed? You will hear Cardinal della Rovere and the other Traditionalists making that argument now. This nonsense that the universities should be required to pair any non-Christian text with a Christian refutation! It's ridiculous. How would you have a Christian refutation of Euclid? Geometry is geometry."

"But it is not all geometry, is it, Rodrigo?" Adriana asked. "It seems this applies most to literature and philosophy."

"You support the freedom of the universities," I said.

"If truth cannot bear scrutiny, it is not truth," Rodrigo said. "I believe in the truth of the gospels and the mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ. But if faith cannot be questioned, how can it be faith? Depriving ourselves of food for our minds is as harmful as depriving ourselves of food for our bodies." He shrugged. "Saying we will forgo all learning that is not Christian is silly. Will we go without double-entry bookkeeping because it was invented by Arabs?"

“And yet prophecy is somewhat different from bookkeeping,” I said, “if it claims to be inspired by pagan gods.”

“What are pagan gods but *daimones*?” he said. “Like unto angels, but neutral in form?”

“I don’t think that’s official doctrine,” I said. It certainly was not, Dante aside.

“I find that very difficult to accept, Rodrigo,” Adriana said. “Were not many Christians martyred in their names?”

“Assuredly,” he said. “Every faith has its fanatics. Look at Florence. They have a friar who is preaching that all is vanity and that every household should give up their finest possessions so that they may come closer to God. God does not begrudge people footstools and carpets!”

“It seems to me,” I said, “that lives of poverty and unhappiness more surely lead people away from God. Even an honest man will be tempted to steal when he is hungry! Even the most virtuous woman will lie down with strangers if she is starving. If we want people to be good, surely we must comfort them and protect them.”

“And therein is the argument for charity,” he said. Rodrigo looked at me, a little smile playing around his lips. “But that does not account for men like me, who have plenty and desire more. David was a king and yet stole Bathsheba.”

Lucrezia put her head to the side. “Are you a very wicked man, Papa?”

“Only a little wicked,” I said, and let Adriana change the subject as she wished.



After dinner he kissed Lucrezia goodnight and we retired. My suite was just down the hall and his hand was at my back as we went in and shut the door. “Are you still feeling unwell, Giulia?” he asked. “You ate almost nothing.”

“I’d rather eat carefully and keep it down,” I said. We went into the camera with my comfortable bed before the fireplace, now dressed with fragrant green boughs for summer. The balcony doors were closed but the shutters and curtains were open so that I could see the sky. I was tired of feeling unwell. Surely my mother was right when she said it would end soon! There was something else I’d meant to tell him. I began to undress while he did. What was it? “Oh, Fiammetta,” I said.

“What about her?” Rodrigo asked. He was sitting on the other side of the bed.

“She’s having a party next Saturday and asked if we’d like to come. I told her that we’d try, so don’t make any other plans.”

“Will you feel well enough?” He fussed with the pillows and covers, fluffing and arranging to his satisfaction.

“How would I know that now?” I lay down in just my *camisa*, my back to him, and he curled up behind me, his arm around my waist. Three months ago it would have inspired breathless desire. Now I appreciated his warm presence, but desire seemed elusive.

“Testy,” he said without heat.

“I don’t mean to be sour.” I closed my eyes. “You could go without me if I’m not up to it.” Which meant tossing him into a group of courtesans who would be delighted with his presence, the lambs Fiammetta had spoken of. It wasn’t that I actually thought he’d prefer someone else, but I was hardly at my most attractive, retching and gagging and uninterested in bed sports.

“We’ll see,” he said. That didn’t sound like he was eager to go.

I snuggled backwards with a little wiggle. He spread his hand against my belly. Quiet. Warm. “Rodrigo, what were your parents like?” Of course they’d been dead for years. I’d never meet them. And one day the child would want to know.

He didn’t answer for a long time. Rodrigo rarely talked about his youth except in the most general terms. One would think he’d sprung full-grown as a Vatican clerk! And yet from the way he was

a father to Lucrezia and her brothers I thought he must have had parents who loved him and taught him to love. I turned over so that I could see his face, settling down against his shoulder.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet. "I was the oldest of five of us, my younger brother and three younger sisters. My mother was very busy." He paused, as though recalling. "She had her hands in everything. She wasn't the kind of woman to leave her household to servants. She was everywhere, it seemed. My father saw to his own lands. Cattle, orchards...."

"Were you wealthy?" That sounded a lot like my own home at Montalto, which was not a great holding.

"No." He sounded amused. "Comfortable, perhaps. I was born in a little town, Xativa, a few miglia from Valencia. My father had inherited—I suppose I should call it an estate, but it was more of a farm. My mother's family were the Borja, a much more respectable family. Her brother was a canon of the cathedral of Valencia. I took his name, my mother's name, as one does in Spain if the mother's family is more distinguished, when I went to live with my uncle." His hand idly traced patterns on my skin. "My father was quieter. Gentle, really. He loved his lands."

"And his children?" I asked. I thought I saw the echo of that gentleness in Rodrigo when he was with Lucrezia.

"Yes," he said. He bent his lips against my forehead for a moment. "I was a very happy child. I loved learning. I loved pretending to be a knight on a perilous quest."

"Amadis de Gaula," I said. The well-thumbed book was in his library, a popular romance with all the adventure and long-lost relatives, convenient coincidences and sword fights one might wish.

There was a smile in his voice. "Yes. I was more interested in the perilous quest than winning the fair lady at that age. I thought a lady's favor was a fine excuse for an adventure."

"Well, it is," I said with a smile. Our hands twined around one another for a moment, then subsided with him stroking the back

of my hand. He liked to touch me absently, constantly, as one pets a cat while talking.

“I imagine I was a lot like Lucrezia when I was a child,” he said. “Sunny. Convinced that the world is a kind place where one is always welcome. Of course I learned better.”

“I’ve thought you must have been like her,” I said. I did not ask how he had learned better.

“I was intended for the Church, but that suited me. I liked my lessons and I liked the idea of seeing the world. I was ambitious.”

I smiled. “Ambitious at that age?”

“I wanted power. How else does one gain power?” Rodrigo’s voice was light.

“It is the best way,” I said. “But what does a child want power for?”

“To order the world as he wishes, of course.” Rodrigo’s hand didn’t stop caressing. “What else is power for, if not to make the rules?”

True enough. “And now you have power.”

“It’s much harder than it seemed then,” he said. He raised my hand to his lips. “But the favor of the lady is more attractive.”

“I will be Oriana to your Amadis at any time,” I said, smiling.

“Complete with chaste adoration?”

“Not so chaste, was it? Didn’t she bear him a child out of wedlock?” I said.

“There is that,” Rodrigo said cheerfully. “I always preferred Oriana to Guinevere. Defiant, unchaste, stubborn as a rock.”

“I do see you have a taste,” I said, and settled back on his shoulder, drifting off to sleep while his hands traced meridians of unknown worlds on my flesh.

Coming soon:
the third book of the *Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl*

THE BLOOD OF THE BULL

Jo Graham

Queen of the Underworld

Rome 1494: Giulia Farnese has risen to heights of power and influence as mistress to Pope Alexander VI, her beloved Rodrigo, but storms loom on the horizon. A French army is marching toward the Kingdom of Naples, and all that stands in their way are the fragile Papal States. If Rodrigo won't surrender to the French, he has enemies who are eager to see him deposed—even if that means the French sack the city of Rome and kill thousands.

Yet an even darker threat is growing. In Florence Friar Savonarola's movement is burning books and priceless works of art, determined to purify society and destroy the Renaissance itself. Giulia's own abilities as a seer make her a target for Savonarola's purifying zeal. The repentant concubine of a Borgia Pope would be the perfect tool to bring Pope Alexander VI to his knees.

In a web of deceit, assassination and betrayal, Giulia must face her most dangerous enemies without Rodrigo by her side. To prevail, she will need all her wits and courage to descend into the darkness of the underworld—and return if she can.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank so many people for their support of this book, including my long-time readers who have encouraged me at every step. I would particularly like to thank my pre-readers Joss Davis, Victoria Francis, Jennifer Roberson, Lena Strid, and J.J. Taylor for their feedback as I worked. I am doubly grateful for Melissa Scott's insights and suggestions as the work unfolded.

I am also indebted to Samantha Morris, who has kindly shared her original research on the Borgias with me and steered me to various sources. Her work on Cesare Borgia was particularly helpful. I am also appreciative of Dr. Katharine Fellows, who shared with me her doctoral thesis on Rodrigo Borgia in his years as vice-chancellor, and her work on the Papal Election of 1492. All mistakes are of course my own. I would also like to thank my editor, Athena Andreadis, who has strengthened this book so much with her considered thoughts.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wonderful partner, Amy Griswold, who inspires everything I do. A million thanks to you!

About the Author

Jo Graham is the author of thirty books and three online games. Best known for her historical fantasy novels *Black Ships* and *Stealing Fire*, and her tie-in novels for MGM's popular *Stargate: Atlantis* and *Stargate: SG-1* series, she has been a Locus Award finalist, an Amazon Top Choice, a Spectrum Award finalist, a Manly Wade Wellman Award finalist, a Romantic Times Top Pick in historical fiction and a Lambda Literary Award and Rainbow Award nominee for bisexual fiction. With Melissa Scott, she is the author of five books in the *Order of the Air* series, a historical fantasy series set in the 1920s and 30s. She is the author of *The Calpurnian Wars* space opera series (*Sounding Dark*, *Warlady*, *Fortune's Favor*) and the *Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl*. She is also the author of three pagan spirituality books. She lives in North Carolina with her partner and is the mother of two daughters.

The
**ADVENTURE
CONTINUES ONLINE!**

Visit the Candlemark & Gleam website to

Find out about new releases

Read free sample chapters

Catch up on the latest news
and author events

Buy books! All purchases on the
Candlemark & Gleam site are DRM-free
and paperbacks come with a free digital version!

Meet flying monkey-creatures
from beyond the stars!*



www.candlemarkandgleam.com

*Space monkeys may not be available in your area. Some restrictions may apply.
This offer is only available for a limited time and is in fact a complete lie.

