

Chapter 1

In Search of The Immortal

February 22, 2017
The Louvre, Paris, France

Benjamin Mann's head is tilted against the taxicab's window, his eyes closed tightly behind dark glasses. Clad in clothes he grabbed from his bedroom floor, he is oblivious to the joyful energy and "spring has sprung" postcard views streaking by his window. He's leaning down as far as his long legs will oblige, hiding himself from life outside the car and the nosy driver, who keeps peering at him in the rearview mirror.

"You okay, mister?" the driver says as he strains his head over the rearview mirror and watches Benjamin stroking his backpack.

Benjamin can see the driver's eyes darting in a triangle between him, the road, and the top of the baseball bat Benjamin saw peeking out from under the front seat. The driver cranks up reggae on the radio—Daddy Mory's *Seigneurs de Guerre*—drowning out Benjamin's deep breathing.

Since graduating with his PhD in art history from Oxford in 2008, Benjamin has been working as a curator at the Louvre. Before his colon cancer diagnosis in 2016, he was determined to excel, pushing himself to exhaustion as he obsessed about every detail in his job description.

Hurry up, he thinks, as he watches his foot tapping the floor. He notices his shoes are both black but don't match.



A few hours ago, he spontaneously committed to tonight's unspeakable act. He was rolling a joint while leaning over the terrace in his luxurious apartment on the fifth floor of Ave. Montaigne, the most sought-after address in the Golden Triangle off the Champs-Élysées in Paris. He decided he had to call a taxi to get to the Louvre and confront *The Immortal*. The decision was triggered by an act of lust, sex, and the carnal enjoyment happening under his terrace as he was sprinkling his weed in the rolling paper.

A young couple was French kissing like two reptiles devouring each other's tongues. The man's hands were roaming up and down the woman's body, and she was moving in sync, stroking his face before pushing her hands down. Zippers were unzipped, garments were savagely pushed downward, genitals were exposed. Then the typical upward thrust, thrust, moan, thrust, moan, and the anticipated climax. The man's head collapsed into the woman's magnificent red hair—hair like a model in a Botticelli portrait.

This last-tango-in-Paris public display of lust and the stench of her perfume infuriated Benjamin. Colon cancer has ruined his life, and he simply could not endure this couple flaunting their youth, health, vitality, and sexuality. He didn't want to be reminded of his former life. He used to have a cock, one that was out of his pants more than it was in, generating a lot of pleasure. Perhaps too much. And he used to have a grandfather who he cherished.

He wanted to fight back against the universe or whatever invisible foe transformed his life into his current hell. He wanted to blast out a string of expletives to the heavens, through the clouds, through the galaxy, finally deafening the ears of the Almighty himself...if He existed.

Instead, the universe threw its own sucker punch.

Benjamin's head and upper body dropped over the side of the terrace as if he was a marionette whose strings had been suddenly snipped.

Did I slip on something?

He wasn't sure, but he was stunned that his muscles had the strength to push his body upright and anchor his feet on the safe side of the terrace. The slip wasted some good pot leaves that were now covering his T-shirt, his face, and his eyelids.

Staggering back through the glass door into his apartment, he groped his way to the sofa and dropped his head between his knees trying to get air into his lungs from his diaphragm and back out again. As soon as his breathing was steady and he could stand, he returned to the terrace and whipped the cordless phone off the side of the terrace wall.

Back inside, he grabbed the first items of clothing not covered in dust bunnies on the floor of his bedroom closet, mentally prepared for this mission, and called a cab.

If people are starting to fuck in the street in this neighbourhood, if cancer can reduce my forty-year-old body to skin barely clinging to bones, it's time to act like the beast the disease has created.

His desire for destruction is motivated by one thing and one thing only: the disappearance of his grandfather. While Benjamin was fighting for his life in a Toronto hospital, Josiah was a constant fixture beside his hospital bed until one night he took off. The next day the family received an email from Josiah saying he was going on a journey with *The Immortal* to find the truth about what they didn't know. The complete absence of clues about what happened to Josiah is making Benjamin crazy.

The Immortal is in Benjamin's office at the Louvre. It mysteriously appeared there a month ago and his assistant secured it in a locked cabinet.

Before Benjamin left Toronto for Paris, he received a package from The Sacred Sinai Desert Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was from a woman named Cle, Josiah's friend for years. Although Benjamin met her a few times, he can't remember much about her. Cle sent a smattering of Josiah's belongings to Benjamin: a Rolex watch, a book about the Desert Fathers by a Father Roberto Sartore, a rosary, a Bible (New Testament) filled with Post-it Notes, and a child's composition notebook with scribbles in many different languages.

No clues as to his grandfather's disappearance were in that odd assortment of objects. *The Immortal*, the venerated golden icon, is his only potential clue.



Now he just needs this taxi driver to boot it to scene of his crime so he can exit this cab and rid himself of the noxious mindfuck of sharp turns and the French reggae boom-booming in his ears. He can't stop caressing it. The feel of the outline of his green kidney-shaped vomit dish in his backpack comforts him. This parting gift from one of the countless, nameless hospitals has been a constant companion over the past year.

Why didn't I grab a belt? He's a weight loss poster child in these jeans. He was a healthy 180-pound man when he put on the first hospital gown. Now, he's an ashen bald head balanced on a popsicle stick.

The taxi swings in front of the Louvre on the Quai des Tuileries.

"You can let me off at the Porte des Lions. Just over there," he shouts, fighting to be heard in between each booming bass note of the reggae.

He exits the cab and leans on the side of the car, pushing the fresh air into his lungs. The warm February weather is like giant oxygen mask. He stretches his arm out the open window on the passenger side and gives the driver a 20 Euro note.

Clutching his waistband, he wobbles through the arches of the Porte des Lions. Snaking slowly through the ground floor hallways of the Louvre, he tries not to waste the little energy he has; he'll need it upstairs.

He brought a strawberry Ensure just in case the pot he smoked brings on the desire to eat.

He pauses and stares at the majestic Daru marble staircase in front of him. It is framed by the fading light of the day streaming in from the giant cupolas that illuminate *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* at the top.

Pressing his sweater firmly into his jeans, he joins the hoard of visitors who've chosen to visit when the Louvre is open late. Clutching the handrail, he pulls himself slowly up the stairs. He almost tips over when he reaches the winged Nike at the top. There was a time when he flew up the stairs two at a time. But now, this bit of exertion makes his lungs feel like they're going to collapse. He bends down and grabs onto the side of the statue, gagging as his body tries to expel something that just isn't there.

Josiah never had *The Immortal* appraised but insisted she was worth millions. She's now temporarily under Benjamin's care. At first, Benjamin was excited she was back, and he was praying Josiah may not be far behind. As each day goes by, he can't stop his mind from focusing on frightening scenarios about Josiah's whereabouts. *The Immortal* is his Pandora's box. He's so mad at her and would throw her down the Daru staircase if she weren't a precious piece of evidence that he's anxious to analyze.

Being untethered from the expensive oncology equipment and intravenous drugs that have been keeping him alive for the past year feels foreign to Ben. He could use a bag of saline in his blood right now, but he doesn't miss the constant needles. This sickness has created a relentless urge to embrace a toilet bowl. At least it's now his own toilet bowl and not the relic in the hospital bathroom. He's almost forgotten what a normal life is even though his life before cancer had been far from normal.

His focus is on his task and the tools that are in his office: a scalpel, infrared camera, various screwdrivers, and custom computer programs. For years, he's wanted to do this for pure fun, to discover more about *The Immortal*, but he would never dare. She's always been exquisite mystery in a frame. Placing his bare hands on her was out of the question, like touching a first folio of Shakespeare's without gloves.

Way back when, he believed each brush stroke, each shadow, and every nuanced colour of a great work of art was like a line of scripture. Art was his religion then.

He no longer worships the beauty of art. Fighting death is now his focus so he can find out what happened to Josiah in the time he has left.

He fumbles with the key to his office. Once inside, he turns the doorknob tight to make sure it's locked. He does not want to be disturbed.

As he slides into one of the leather chairs, he sucks in air and focuses on controlling his breathing. This is his first time stepping foot in his office in a year. He's missed it: the wall-to-wall-bookshelves, his Roman statues, his large picture window with a view of the Cour Napoleon, the leather sofa that doubled as a bed, especially when he was too absorbed in his work to make the short trip home.

He gets up and unlocks the cabinet. There she is. A Renaissance love poem shaped out of the most luxurious gold. A mixture of cloisonné gold, enamel, and oil paint. The gold of *The Immortal's* face is beaming.

Another one of his prized possessions is a portrait of Marie Antoinette painted when she was a child and still the Austrian Archduchess. It hangs over his seventeenth-century black marble fireplace. He used to live like Marie Antoinette. Now he's a desperate, unkempt revolutionary, fighting phantom enemies. He walks over to the fireplace, carefully lifts Marie Antoinette up and over her hook on the wall and replaces her with *The Immortal*. It's a feat of strength for such a weak man but he accomplishes his task with only a couple of pauses to take a few deep breaths.

He is finally going to release *The Immortal* from her ornate six-inch-thick frame of golden Corinthian columns. He may be dead soon, either naturally or deliberately. If the latter, it will happen with the gun he plans on procuring if he discovers Josiah is dead. But first, he needs to vent his fury on this stunning woman whose face has penetrated his soul since he was a child.

Andrea Sartore's *The Immortal* was owned by Josiah's wife Sera, the Venetian grandmother Benjamin never met. Not long ago it had been in Josiah's home. After he started getting disturbing letters from a woman who wanted to buy her, Josiah hid *The Immortal* in his secret room that he loftily called his studiolo. Josiah never shared the mysterious woman's name with Benjamin. As a CEO, Josiah was no stranger to

disturbing mail but the correspondence and continual phone calls from the woman were aggressive. She became so unhinged, Josiah had to threaten legal action.

Sartore's legacy is *The Immortal*. Benjamin has searched for other examples of his work. Many are described in grand detail in ornate prose in the Venetian archives, but he's hasn't been able to track them down.

Staring at her had been his favourite childhood pastime, but until now, he hadn't seen her in at least five years. He'd forgotten how beautiful she is. Her features so delicate, as if the gold had been poured onto her face, creating a divine death mask, then buffed meticulously by angels' hands. Each side of her face is a mirror of the other: oval-shaped with a tiny nose, smooth jaw, eyebrows like an exquisite frame around a masterpiece. Her full lips are sculpted out of rubies, slightly open like they're awaiting a soft kiss or pondering her deep secrets. She's a perfect woman.

He glides his finger over her hair—a luscious wavy mane of black enamel that cascades down her shoulders giving her the look of a Greek goddess—resting on a lavish purple gown. A mosaic of gold glass is fashioned into a commanding scepter, entwined with two serpents crowned with delicate wings. The Rod of Caduceus. The symbol of health and magic and alchemy.

Her elegant hands clutch a small gold book to her heart. Her only flaw, if it could be called one, are her eyes: two deep golden almonds, elevated from wooden panel, with round pupils punched deeply into the gold, and polished. They look like bullets.

The pupils aren't symmetrical; the left gazes up over a flawless arched brow and the right stares off to the side. She doesn't want to look at anyone...yet she doesn't want to miss anything with her mysterious gaze. Benjamin has always been sure the positioning of her eyes was intentional but doesn't know why.

This golden goddess is surrounded by a dark and eerie desert oil paint landscape. The landscape is not unlike da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*.

Over her shoulder is the gloomy entrance to a cave, a foreboding hollow framed by dark brown rocks of various sizes. The portrait's background looks like Mount Sinai has been smashed into pieces and formed into a mishmash of granite beasts out of the mismatched rocks. Since childhood, Benjamin has been trying to uncover meaning in the way the rocks were arranged, how the hues of brown were created.

Beyond the rocks, the landscape opens towards the golden light of day and a blurry object, perhaps a building. He walks closer and studies the portrait like he has done so many times. As he stares at the object in the distance, the portrait starts falling towards him, twenty pounds that just misses pounding his face. He reaches to catch it, but it slides through his hands and hits his head. He can feel himself falling towards the conference table. He breaks his fall by grabbing the back of one of the leather conference chairs.

The Immortal crashes to the floor, landing face up. She stares at him with an intense, unwavering gaze. *How on earth did she fall to the floor? I checked the book. Everything was secure.*

He moves to his desk and retrieves a flashlight from one of the drawers. As he slowly circles the room, he shines the flashlight in all directions. He is definitely alone.

Benjamin is not easily spooked but this is peculiar. If he still had any hair on his arms, it would be standing up. For a moment, he considers contacting someone for help to place *The Immortal* back on the wall before bolting home.

No, he can't go home. He must discover what lies within her.

He focuses the flashlight back on the painting to examine the damage. Strangely, she's intact—including the glass in the frame—except for some damage at the top of the frame. One of the brackets has come apart. Moving in closer he examines two pieces of wood that have separated to see if the frame can easily be fixed. Benjamin rubs his hands over the severed edge and notices something poking out.

He realizes the protrusion isn't a metal clamp to keep edges of the frame together as he had assumed. Something is lodged inside the corner of the frame. He puts his reading glasses on to examine it more closely and notices it is gold. He gives it a few gentle tugs, freeing it from the frame, and brings it to his eyes to have a closer look.

“Holy shit.”

The Immortal's Secret
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