

THE LAST TRUE TEMPLAR

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THE TALES OF THE LAWLESS LAND SERIES

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THE LAST TRUE TEMPLAR

TALES OF THE LAWLESS LAND: BOOK II



BOYD † BETH
MORRISON



An Aries Book

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To Randi and John

The Eastern Mediterranean, 1351



Prologue

March, 1314

PARIS

It seemed as if the entire city had come for the execution. Massive crowds lined both banks of the Seine, straining to view the stake set into a pile of logs on the tiny island of Île aux Juifs. A man holding a flaming torch waited for the command to do his duty.

In the fading light of dusk, the four men tied back to back around the tall post looked unafraid, even serene. They knew the horror that was to come and that insufficient fuel was deliberately used to ensure a slow and agonizing death. But they seemed at peace with their decision to recant the false confessions that had been tortured out of them. For this reversal, they'd been branded lapsed heretics, the most heinous crime imaginable.

Domenico Ramberti stood on the southern bank of the river, forcing himself to control the shivering and coughing that had racked his body on and off for the last six months of his long journey. Although he had occasional bursts of energy, today he felt older than his forty-eight years. But if Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Templar, could maintain his noble bearing while he met his fate, Ramberti could keep his composure as well.

Many of his fellow knights had been tortured over the past seven years, ever since that dark Friday the 13th in 1307 when King Philip had ordered the simultaneous arrest of all Templars across France. Ramberti had escaped only because he had been in Italy at the time. Since then, he'd done everything he could to preserve his beloved order, but now he was here to witness the *coup de grâce*.

After this day, Ramberti would be the last true Knight Templar.

Molay, in his seventies, balding with a rim of white hair and a long flowing beard, stood straight atop the pyre, maintaining the dignity for which he was renowned. The marshal's cry to carry out the sentence was loud enough for all to hear. Molay didn't debase himself to watch as the executioner dipped his torch to the kindling, setting the logs ablaze.

Above the growing flames, Molay shouted something. The crowd grew still, eager to hear his final words. His voice carried across the water, strong and clear.

"God knows that the hearts of the Templars are pure. He knows who is in the wrong and has sinned. God will avenge our deaths. Make no mistake, all who have borne false witness against us will suffer because of what has been done to us."

The curse caused many of the spectators to gasp and whisper, but they kept listening. The flames grew, and black smoke belched forth. By now, Ramberti could feel the heat of the fire himself. To Molay the inferno must have been unbearable, and yet he continued to speak.

"I call for His Holiness Pope Clement to join me within a year and a day before God, where he will have to answer for his vile betrayal. I not only summon His Highness King Philip to the same fate, but his descendants likewise to fall and his family line to come to an inglorious end. At the last, the world will know the truth about our innocence. The brotherhood will be reborn, and no one will doubt the nobility and virtue of the Knights Templar."

As his final words rang out, the thick smoke obscured the men who so bravely endured their torture, sparing Ramberti from watching his beloved grand master being burned alive.

He could only hope that Molay's curse would come to pass. The king, who owed a fortune to the Templars, had concocted the false accusations that brought down the order so that he could wipe his debt clean and seize the vast holdings of the Templars for his own. The pope, a weakling and a fool, had succumbed to Philip's threats and joined him in condemning the Templars, disbanding

them completely two years ago and handing over what remained of their holdings to the rival Knights Hospitaller.

But Ramberti knew something they did not, the real reason that Molay had finally recanted his confessions to fabricated crimes such as denying Christ and desecrating the cross. Just days ago, he had informed Molay that the resources to restore the Templars to their past glory were now well hidden from the French king, waiting only for the right time and worthy champions to restore the order's rightful place in the world.

Ramberti's determination to safeguard the remaining Templar wealth had grown into an obsession that consumed his every waking minute. Despite the danger, he had braved terrible hardship and illness, and had even forsaken his own family to come back to Paris to deliver the news to the grand master that the treasure was safe, giving Molay and his men the peace of mind to at last deny their false admissions of guilt so that they could face death as faithful Knights Templar.

Ramberti stayed long enough to pay his respects. He turned to melt into the throngs who had already grown tired of the spectacle and were receding from the shore.

He stopped abruptly at the sight of a face he thought he'd never see again. It was Riccardo Corosi, the young man who had betrayed everything the Templars stood for and doomed the order. Three stout men-at-arms stood to either side of him.

"You shouldn't have come back here," Corosi said. "I was hoping you had given up on your deluded quest to save the Templars, but I suspected you'd remain loyal to Molay until the bitter end. Now you leave me no choice."

"No matter what you do to me, the Templars will rise again. Loyalty is one of our sacred creeds, but you've betrayed every oath you've ever taken. You're nothing but a petulant child."

"And you're an old fool living in a dream world. The Templars have been extinguished forever."

"I know what you really want, Riccardo." Ramberti drew his sword. "I won't let you take me alive."

By now some of the gathered crowd had stopped to watch the unusual confrontation.

"Despite how you've wronged me," Corosi said, "I'll grant you a quick death if you tell me what I want to know."

"After I raised you and taught you the importance of a knight's honor, the best you can offer me is a quick death?"

Corosi barked a derisive laugh. "All I ever wanted was to be your knightly ideal, until the moment *you* betrayed *me* and I realized that every word from your mouth was a two-faced lie. But let's not talk in front of all these people. We should have some privacy." He nodded at his men. "Remember, I need him breathing."

The men-at-arms advanced on Ramberti. Even if there was a shred of devotion left buried in Corosi for his former mentor, he'd order his men to batter Ramberti into submission with the flats of their swords and haul him off to some dungeon for questioning under torture.

At his best, Ramberti might have successfully fought off six men, but in this weakened state, his defeat was inevitable. He couldn't let himself be captured, not with the secret he held. He didn't trust himself to withstand the brutality that he knew was in store for him.

He charged at the men, screaming and swinging his sword wildly. He hoped one of them would lose his restraint and strike him down in one deadly blow.

But the men were disciplined. They spread themselves out, blocking his thrusts but not going on the offensive, obviously planning to wear him out. Corosi watched from afar, keeping a careful eye on the proceedings.

Ramberti coughed from the exertion, which gave him an idea. He played up the spasms, hacking violently before pausing to seemingly catch his breath.

"You must have fallen ill on your long journey, old man," Corosi said, casually edging toward the circle of men surrounding Ramberti.

"I don't know what you mean," Ramberti said, spitting a gob of blood on the ground.

"You didn't hide the treasure in France. You'd want to get it as far away from King Philip as you could."

"I would be less worried about the treasure than about the king's letter to the pope that I took from you."

Corosi couldn't hide his fury and came even closer. "I will find out what you know. You will be begging to tell me."

Ramberti stood straight, as if gathering the last of his strength, and launched another flurry of strikes against the men-at-arms. He then fainted in the direction away from Corosi. While the men were adjusting to his move, he dived past their feet in the opposite direction, rolling and jumping up toward the shocked Corosi, whose drawn sword had been languishing by his side.

Ramberti brought his sword down with all his might. Corosi was able to counter the blow but fell backward, dropping his weapon. Ramberti leaped upon him, putting his knee on Corosi's chest. They wrestled with the hilt of his sword as Ramberti forced the edge of the blade to within an inch of Corosi's throat, the weight of his body overcoming the strength in Corosi's sinewy arms. Abject terror flared in the traitor's eyes.

"Kill him!" Corosi shrieked. "Kill him now!"

Ramberti went rigid as he felt something slam into his back like a hammer. His arms went limp, and he looked down to see the point of a sword protruding from his chest.

The blade was withdrawn, and Ramberti fell on top of Corosi, who pushed him off. Corosi scrambled to his feet, his tunic covered in Ramberti's blood. Corosi looked horrified at what he had done.

Surprisingly, Ramberti felt no pain, just a coldness enveloping his body. But he knew he had accomplished his goal. His life was ebbing away. No torture could touch him now.

Corosi, apparently realizing his mistake, bent down and shook Ramberti by the shoulders.

"Where is the treasure?"

Ramberti shook his head in disappointment. "I loved you like a son."

A fleeting expression of regret on Corosi's face showed that the words wounded him.

"And you were the one who cast me away in favor of Matteo. Now tell me where you've hidden it!"

"You'll never find it. You're not worthy." Ramberti was getting light-headed and dizzy. "Only Luciana and Matteo are."

"Matteo is dead. I killed him myself."

"No," Ramberti lamented. "They were to be married."

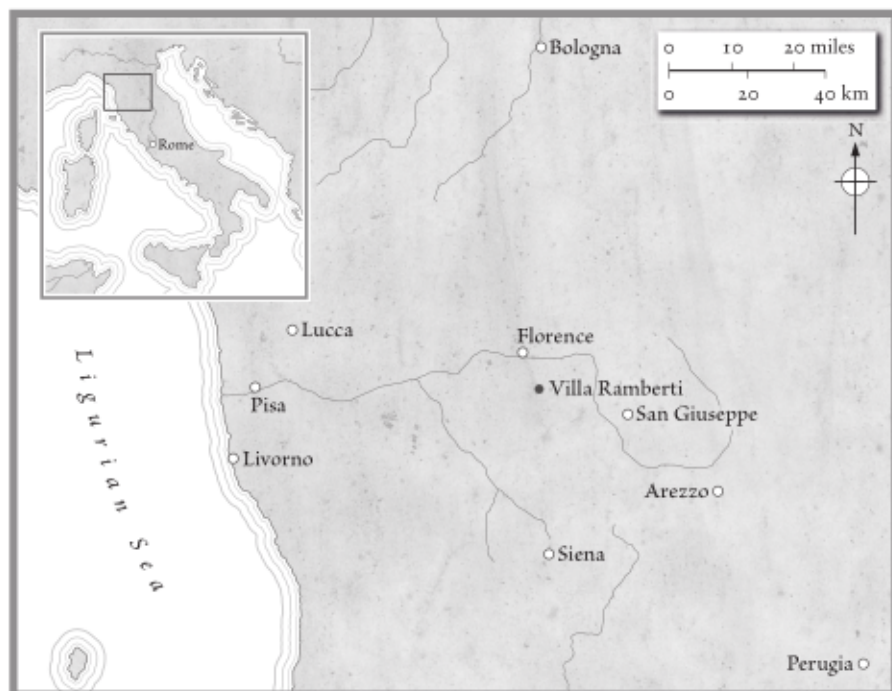
Corosi shook his head. "I destroyed all of your plans. Your beloved daughter didn't marry your favored pupil. I convinced her that Matteo betrayed you. After that, it was easy to persuade her to marry me. The generous dowry you left her before becoming a Templar is now mine. I have already used it to begin building my banking empire. I suppose I should thank you, *Father*."

Ramberti closed his eyes, with Corosi's jeering face as his final horrid vision. Despite Molay's dying pronouncement that they would someday rise victorious, the Templars would be doomed if no one were able to vindicate them by finding what Ramberti had hidden. As he took his last breath, he clung to hope that what Corosi said was a lie.

Because if his words were the truth, the trail Ramberti had left for Matteo and Luciana would never be followed, and the treasure of the Templars was lost to eternity.

THE NOBLE INHERITANCE

Tuscany





October, 1351

SAN GIUSEPPE, TUSCANY

Luciana Corosi's heart beat a little faster with every step her horse took as her Florentine entourage entered the small village. She hadn't been here in years because it was so remote from the main road between Florence and Siena, the exact reason she had chosen it for this morning's secret rendezvous.

On her left rode the captain of her guard, Umberto. He was dressed in a bright blue tunic and wore a hat with a white feather signifying that he was the leader of his six men-at-arms. All of them carried swords that Luciana hoped they would not have to use.

"Signora," Umberto said, his bushy black eyebrows knotted with concern, "I would prefer if you would ride into town behind us."

"Absolutely not," Luciana replied. "I know you are here to protect me, Umberto, but I cannot come into this meeting cowering behind you. Besides, the Sieneese wouldn't dare try anything so bold as to attack us. The last thing Siena would want is a war with Florence."

"As you wish, signora."

On her right was her lady's maid Sofia, whose eyes darted to the foreboding forest surrounding the fields of wheat ready for harvest and pastures thick with sheep. Luciana couldn't fault the girl's apprehension. The large wooden chest on the wagon behind them would be a tempting target if any highwaymen knew of the riches it held.

"Calm yourself, Sofia."

"I'm sorry, signora," Sofia replied. "My eyes continue to deceive me. I see robbers in every gap in the trees."

Sofia turned to her and gave a half-hearted smile. Her maid was a true beauty, with ebony curls, unblemished olive skin, and wide brown eyes. Ever since Luciana had lost her longtime lady's maid in the Great Mortality three years ago, Sofia had been her most trusted companion. Now that Luciana was well into her fifties, the maidservant—more than three decades her junior—brought vitality and spirit into her life.

"If robbers were bold enough to take on Umberto and his men," Luciana said, "they would have done it long before we reached a settled village. We'll be rid of that chest soon enough, if that's what worries you."

"I admire your courage, signora. I will take strength from it."

Luciana was glad she was projecting an air of confidence, despite her nervousness. However, it wasn't fear that gripped her, but anticipation. If she was right, this transaction could be the means to solve a mystery that had gnawed at her for nearly forty years.

The village of San Giuseppe was nestled in a valley, split by a single road through the cluster of buildings that included homes, a tavern, and a stone church with stand-alone bell tower. The air smelled of freshly baked bread and brewing ale as they passed the residents going about their business. Most of them glanced up briefly at their unusual visitors before going back to their daily tasks. The only people who looked out of place were a man and woman putting their saddlebags onto two fine horses, one mottled silver and the other pure white. The couple was so deep into a tense discussion that they didn't even turn their heads to look at the strangers.

Up ahead in the center of town, Luciana could see that her counterparts had already arrived. As agreed, Piero Barbieri had only a commander of arms and six swordsmen in addition to the driver of the wagon that accompanied them. Piero, younger than her by two decades, was the cousin of Jacopo Barbieri, the

owner of the most prominent bank in Siena. He was dressed in an elegant crimson surcoat and a jaunty bycoket with a peaked brim.

Luciana came to a stop. He took in her entourage before nodding at her, a look of disdain on his face.

“Signora Corosi, it’s my pleasure to see you again.”

“No, it isn’t. I know you were against this bargain.”

“Selling our bank’s branch in Florence to your husband is a bad idea, but Jacopo insisted.”

“Your cousin got sloppy. There’s a reason we didn’t loan money to the king of France for his war with England. Jacopo should have known it’s dragged on so long that the king would eventually default on his debts.”

He tilted his head at her. “So the rumors are true. You are well acquainted with Signore Corosi’s financial dealings. I know sometimes merchant’s wives learn their husband’s trades, but I’ve never heard of a lady being so involved in her husband’s business.”

“Riccardo trusts no one else.”

“According to the talk, you have a head for numbers. Is that the reason he trusts you?”

“I’m simply here to do my husband’s bidding. Now, shall we complete our business?”

As they dismounted, Luciana saw the driver of her wagon jump down and go over to Umberto, dancing from toe to toe as he spoke in hushed tones. Her captain seemed annoyed and waved off the man, who scurried toward a group of people standing near the church.

“What was that about?” Luciana asked him.

“Elio needed to relieve himself, so I told him go away and find the latrine.”

“Just as long as he’s back by the time we’re done.”

With Umberto at her side, she walked up to Piero. “You have the contract?”

Piero nodded. “Signed by Jacopo.”

“And the letter?”

He patted his scrip. “In here as well. You have the money?”

Luciana turned to Umberto and nodded. He called back to his men to bring the chest.

Four of her soldiers strained to carry the massive strongbox to them and set it at their feet. Luciana took the key from her pouch and unlocked it. Umberto raised the lid, revealing stacks of gold coins that filled the chest.

"Ten thousand gold florins," Luciana said.

Piero stared in wonder at the fortune, an amount rarely seen in one place, even for a banker. Usually, they would have used a bill of exchange for such a large transaction, but secrecy demanded coinage in this case.

"Do you want to count it?" she asked.

The question brought him out of his reverie. "Of course." He nodded at his captain, who kneeled beside it and began inspecting the one hundred linen sleeves each containing one hundred coins.

"You'll find them all there."

"I'm sure." He took the parchment contract from his leather scrip and unrolled it. The top and bottom halves of the scroll were inscribed with identical agreements. He showed her Jacopo Barbieri's signature on both sides next to where Riccardo Corosi had already placed his mark.

When Luciana indicated her assent that the contract was complete, Piero took out a dagger and cut the document in half in a jagged line. He handed her one part and kept the other for himself. Now neither side could forge a replacement, for it wouldn't match the pattern of the cut on its twin.

As Luciana rolled it up, she said, "And the letter?"

Piero drew out a much smaller folded piece of parchment. "I don't understand why this is so important to you."

"That's none of your concern," Luciana said as she took it from him more eagerly than she should have.

It was addressed to Matteo Dazzo. Jacopo had told her of a letter that had been delivered to Matteo's cousin, Jacopo's wife, after his death. His wife had always been fond of Matteo and had kept the letter for decades without mentioning it to her husband, who'd disliked her cousin. Jacopo had only learned of it after

she'd died within the last year. He'd tantalized Luciana with the opening lines of the letter, telling her he would only hand it over after she persuaded her husband to negotiate a favorable deal that would provide him with funds for his struggling bank.

Piero shrugged. "Frankly, the letter doesn't even make sense, but your influence was necessary to get this bargain done. And now, if he ever needs a favor from you, he knows something that you're not telling your husband."

Luciana glared at him but said nothing as she slipped the letter and contract into her pouch.

Piero's captain was only halfway done with his counting when the church bell began to ring, far too soon to signal the midday hour of sext. The only reason to sound the bell other than the tolling of the time was to warn of danger.

They all looked around for some sign of smoke, the most common reason for an alarm.

Luciana asked Umberto, "Do you see a fire?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

The bell didn't stop ringing.

"What's going on?" Piero said, finally looking up from the hoard of gold.

They all gazed up at the tower. Luciana was shocked to see that it was the driver of her wagon pulling on the rope.

"What the devil is he doing up there?" Umberto said.

Then Luciana heard something else. A low rumble.

She turned to the source of the sound. Only a few hundred yards up the northern road were eight horses charging toward the town. Every rider was wearing some form of armor and a helmet, and their swords were drawn for battle. They were led by a man in full mail and a great helm with brass fittings that gave the impression of sharp fangs on a hideous skull.

Luciana wheeled around to berate Piero for his treachery, but he made the accusation first in a terrified shrill voice.

"You harlot! You dare attack us now that the deal is done?"

"They're not with us, you idiot!"

"Signora!" Umberto shouted. "We need to leave now!"

Piero slammed the lid shut on the chest and didn't bother to ask for the key to lock it. He had his men hoist it toward their wagon.

Luciana remounted her horse, and she was about to flee down the road with Umberto, Sofia, and the rest of the men when she was horrified to see another eight armored riders coming up the road from the south.

That's why her driver had rung the bell. He had betrayed them all by letting the marauders know it was time for the assault.

"Stay behind us, signora!" Umberto yelled and formed his men into a line to face the approaching attackers from the north while Piero's men did the same to meet the southern riders. She didn't know how long they would be able to hold out. Though the numbers were nearly even, neither her guards nor Piero's were clad in armor.

She looked at Sofia, who seemed frozen with fright.

"Sofia! We'll make it through this!"

Sofia was jolted out of her paralyzed state by her name. She turned to her mistress and nodded, then focused again on the riders bearing down on them.

The villagers were scrambling like mad to get to some sort of safety. The noblewoman that Luciana had seen earlier was now on her white horse riding around calling for the villagers to go to the church for sanctuary. The nobleman she'd been with was nowhere to be seen.

Luciana looked for a way out of the town for her and Sofia if the battle went badly. They could go around the houses and back up the road, but any pursuers would soon catch them. The only other choice would be to try venturing into the forest.

Piero's men panicked while carrying the chest and fumbled as they were trying to shove it onto their wagon. The box tumbled off and slammed into the hard ground, spilling golden coins in all directions. The lid of the chest banged into its wooden frame like a thunderclap.

The sharp noise caused Luciana's already-unnerved horse to rear back. She wasn't yet settled into her stirrups, and the sudden

movement caught her by surprise. She was launched from her saddle, floating in the air for a sickening moment before striking her head on something hard.

She was dazed for a few moments before her vision came back into focus. Her ears buzzed and she suddenly felt nauseated.

Her horse was nowhere to be seen. It must have run off. Sofia. Where was her lady's maid? She would help. Luciana raised her head and with dismay saw Sofia clinging to the reins of her own horse as it tore off through the wheat fields, probably frightened by the loud report that had alarmed Luciana's mount.

As her hearing came back, Luciana could make out the clash of swords. She struggled to her knees and saw that Umberto and his men were now locked in a vicious battle with the armored marauders. They fought ferociously, but she could tell that they were outmatched. It was only a matter of time before they were all cut down.

With her horse gone, Luciana called out to Umberto, but he was so focused on leading his men in the fight that he didn't hear her.

She tried to stand, and her dizziness forced her back down again. She blinked and there were hooves in front of her. Luciana looked up expecting to see one of the attackers, but it was the noblewoman on the white horse. With an expression of concern, she was speaking, but in her haze Luciana couldn't understand the words.

Something caught the noblewoman's attention, and Luciana followed her gaze. One of the marauders had broken off and was heading toward them, his bloody sword raised for more victims.

To Luciana's amazement, the noblewoman didn't flee. Instead, she plucked a bow from her saddle and reached into an arrow bag beside her.

With cool concentration, the noblewoman pulled the bowstring back and nocked an arrow while holding two more in her draw hand, a technique Luciana had never seen in her life.

The noblewoman loosed the first arrow, and it flew past the charging attacker. The miss just seemed to enrage him, for he

yelled a piercing battle cry. The noblewoman launched the next two arrows in a blur, far faster than Luciana could have imagined.

The second arrow hit the marauder squarely in the torso. It simply bounced off the coat plates under his tabard.

The third arrow, however, found its mark. It plunged deep into the vulnerable spot between the top of his breastplate and the lower edge of his helmet.

The marauder dropped his sword and fell from his horse, landing less than a body length away from Luciana as his horse raced past them.

With her bow hand holding the reins, the noblewoman leaned down and reached her free hand out to Luciana.

This time, Luciana could understand her words. In English-accented Italian, the noblewoman said, "My name is Willa. Take my hand, signora, or we're both going to die."