

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF  
**LEONARDO DA VINCI**

# LEONARDO'S SECRET

**Peter David Myers**

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THE  
MENTORIS  
PROJECT

# Chapter One

## THE DREAM

In the full gleam of a summer afternoon in the year 1459, among the forests and foothills of Italian Tuscany, a handsome boy of seven lay in the weeds and grass by the side of a road. Leonardo, of the town of Vinci, was as motionless as the land around him that baked in the hot sun. His blue eyes were focused on a lizard that warmed itself on a rock, oblivious to the boy's slowly approaching hand.

The grass and weeds made Leonardo's skin itch, but he suppressed the urge to scratch. The constant trilling of the birds didn't distract him. His hand lunged like a bullet and snatched up the lizard.

Grinning with delight, Leonardo stood up and reached for his burlap sack. He held the lizard inches from his face and stared at it, fascinated. "Hello, Signore Lizard! You weren't quick enough today. Did the sun make you lazy?" He paused to take in his catch, examining its head and tail. "It's all right, my little friend. You're safe. I just want to study you. After that, I'll set you free."

Leonardo gently put the lizard in the sack and wiped the summer sweat from his brow. Intrigued by a myrtle plant, he snapped off a leafy stem and dropped it in his sack.

The voices of approaching children wafted on the breeze. Appearing around a bend in the road, three boys and a girl carried their own crudely woven burlap sacks, similar to Leonardo's, that had earlier held their lunches and now contained their lessons. They all saw Leonardo at once. He looked at them warily from the side of the road. A boy named Giorgio called out, "Look, it's the bastard child of Ser Piero the notary, hunting in the bushes again!" The other boys giggled.

Giorgio approached Leonardo with a phony smile. "Why don't you come to school with us, Leonardo? Oh, I forgot. You're a bastard. You can't go to school!" He looked at his friends to see how his punch line had landed. The boys laughed, enjoying the mockery of this strange child who kept to himself. But the girl was silent. She looked compassionately at Leonardo as he darted into the forest. The boys yelled and chanted after him, "*Eremita! Eremita!* Hermit! Hermit!"

At a safe distance from the road, Leonardo wiped his eyes. It wasn't the first time he had been teased, and he knew it wouldn't be the last. He sat at the foot of an old oak, put an arm around its trunk and leaned his head against it, as if it were a beloved uncle. Now content, he surveyed the peaceful forest and the soft green light that filtered through the leaves onto the forest floor. He felt a kinship with everything he saw. The birds didn't call him a hermit; they sang to him. The forest didn't laugh; it welcomed him with the open arms of its many branches. The forest was always there to accept and protect him.

Still, he wished he could go to school with the other children, wished they wouldn't make fun of him, and wished his

father wouldn't largely ignore him, leaving Leonardo to his grandparents' care. Sometimes he felt very alone. He sighed like an adult resigned to life.

A songbird chirped above him in a nearby tree. "Why do you sing?" Leonardo asked aloud. It flew away and he laughed. "I want to fly like you!" he called after the bird. "I want to be free!" He felt better, having voiced his dream.

From farther away came the rat-a-tat of a woodpecker, stabbing its beak into the bark of a tree. Leonardo stood and followed the sound. He reached a tall pine where the woodpecker was hard at work.

Leonardo watched, totally absorbed. "Hello, bird!" he said. "Why do you do that?" The woodpecker plucked a grub from the bark. "So that's why!" Leonardo exclaimed. "You have to eat bugs all day to live!"

Leonardo drank in the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest. He looked up at the sun that shone through the trees. This was his true home. This was his schoolroom, where he could learn whatever he wanted. He spotted the bone of a small animal on the forest floor and picked it up.

After examining it closely, Leonardo added the bone to the collection in his sack. He did the same with a jagged-edged rock. At the edge of a meadow, he noticed a bee launching itself from a flower blossom. He plucked the blossom, studied it from every angle, and rubbed pollen between his fingers. "Why does the bee put your dust on its legs?" he asked the flower. "Does he eat it later?" He put the flower in the sack, along with a few leaves, oddly shaped twigs, and scraps of bark.

Later, walking past some bushes in the meadow, Leonardo saw a spider weaving a web between two branches. As he came closer, the spider sensed him and froze, suspended. Leonardo lay

down in the soft grass and watched the spider, staying perfectly still. In a few moments, the spider resumed its task. Leonardo smiled, turned over on his back, and gazed at the sky.

## Chapter Two

### NONNA

On a summer afternoon the following year, Leonardo, now eight, sat on the forest floor and sketched a squirrel that rooted for food a few feet away.

“Pepino, you are such a pretty squirrel,” he said. “Thank you for posing for me. Where is your girlfriend, Angelina, today? I want to draw her too.” The squirrel pulled a chestnut from where he’d buried it and began gnawing at the shell. “Ah, you like chestnuts!” Leonardo exclaimed. “Tomorrow I will bring you some from home, and you can hide them for the winter.”

The squirrel ran off with the chestnut. “Pepino! Where are you going?” Tucking his pencil and paper inside his sack, Leonardo followed the squirrel, which disappeared in thick underbrush. When he leaned down to peer through it, he was surprised to see the entrance to a cave.

Leonardo approached it warily, trying to see inside, and was met with darkness and silence. His face a mixture of curiosity and fear, he entered, moving slowly. His eyes became used to the darkness, but all he could see was the wall beside him. He slipped and fell, hitting his knee on the stone floor of the cave.

Moments later, screwing up his face in pain, Leonardo hobbled out of the cave. His right pants leg was torn open at the knee, which was skinned and bloody. Forgetting the squirrel, he limped toward home. Children from other households noticed his knee and asked about it, but he was silent. Gripping his sack, he entered his father's compound and walked toward his grandparents' house.

Lucia, Leonardo's grandmother—he affectionately called her Nonna—was slicing potatoes in the kitchen as Leonardo collapsed into a chair at the rough-hewn dining table. She shrieked at the sight of his bloodied knee.

“*Bambino! Madonna mia!* What happened to you? Are you all right?” She dropped her knife and potato and knelt on the floor in front of him. “What have you done to your knee?”

“It's nothing, Nonna. Just a scrape.”

“Just a scrape, he says! What are we going to do with you? Sit still and don't move.” She got up, dipped a rag in a pot of water that boiled on the hearth, and returned to his knee. He cried out as she applied the steaming rag.

“Are the other children making fun of you again?” Lucia wanted to know. “Did you get in a fight?”

“No, Nonna,” Leonardo answered, wincing. “I was exploring and I tripped. It's nothing.”

She pulled several clay jars full of herbs from a shelf and began grinding a mixture in a little hot water. “If your father were not always seeing clients away from the village, he wouldn't let you get into such mischief. Where did this happen?”

“I found a secret cave!” he said excitedly.

“So it's a cave this time? I hope this will teach you to stay out of such places. You might have surprised a wild boar and been gored to death, or been bitten by a badger or a snake!”

Leonardo knew how to play her. “Yes, Nonna, you’re right,” he said, making his face serious.

“You frighten me so when I think of you wandering the countryside alone!” his grandmother said. She took hold of his shoulders and put her face in front of his. “Leonardo, do you know how much Nonno and I love you?”

“Yes, Nonna.” He paused. “But what about Papa?”

“Of course he loves you!”

Leonardo looked away. “I don’t know.”

“*Si, Bambino!* He loves you very much. But it’s true he doesn’t show it, and he’s almost never here.” She finished making her herbal paste and spooned some of it onto his knee. Then she wrapped the knee in a clean cloth. The paste stung a little, but Leonardo knew it was good because his Nonna had made it.

“*Finito!*” Lucia proclaimed. She stood, put her hands on her hips, and surveyed his knee as if its creation had been her accomplishment. “You could have been badly hurt, Leonino. Bleeding in a cave where the wolves would have found you before us. Don’t go where you don’t belong!”

Leonardo looked up at her with tear-filled eyes. “Where do I belong, Nonna?”

She embraced him. “*Bambino mio!* You belong right here. In my heart.”

He basked in the warmth of his Nonna’s embrace and the pleasant aroma of lamb and vegetable stew that simmered on the hearth. When her hug released the tension in his body, the thrill of exploration and new knowledge took hold of him once more.

“I had to look in the cave,” he said, “or I wouldn’t have known what was inside.”

“*Basta, you!*”

“But it could have been something marvelous.”

“There is nothing marvelous out there! Just trees and squirrels and dirt. You spend every afternoon in the forest and the hills and bring back useless objects.” She pointed accusingly at the sack that bulged slightly with what she was sure were unpleasant contents.

“I have to study the animals and the plants!” he protested. “I want to learn all about them.”

Lucia sighed. She had complained many times, to both her husband and her son, but had never managed to get the boy into a proper school. Her husband did what he could to teach him Latin and mathematics, but it wasn’t enough. Without more education, Leonardo could never hope for any station in life higher than that of a notary, like his father.

She looked down sadly at her grandson. She knew there was greatness in him, and a powerful curiosity that couldn’t and shouldn’t be squelched. She regretted scolding him about the cave. She didn’t want to dampen his spirit of adventure.

Lucia could never discuss what she saw in Leonardo with the men in the family—that he was destined for something more than obscurity in Vinci. Her husband and son had accepted their own lot in life. But Leonardo wasn’t like them. Lucia often daydreamed about Leonardo leaving the village, making his way in the world, and becoming famous. For what, she didn’t know, but she recognized his intelligence and creativity, and from that she spun a future. She brought her mind back from its wanderings and smiled at her grandson.

“*Mio bambino*, they won’t let you into school. So you’ve made the world your schoolroom, haven’t you?”

“*Si*, Nonna. It’s much more fun!”

“But nothing dangerous from now on. No more caves. Promise me!”

“No, Nonna, I can’t,” Leonardo said. At eight, he was already a young man of honor. He wouldn’t promise because he knew that the next day might bring him another treacherous adventure, and he was game for it.

Lucia sighed. “You are too much for me, Leonino. I give up. But we’ll see what happens when your father returns from Florence.”

She cleaned up the remains of the herbs and went back to her potatoes. Leonardo walked toward the door.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” she said. “Where are you going?”  
“To sit outside, Nonna.”

She smiled and sliced a potato.

Leonardo sat idly on the front stoop of the house. He was bored. He watched a sheepdog puppy playing with its mother. Then he saw Lucio, the beekeeper, coming down the path with a cart full of honey deliveries in glass jars.

Lucio hailed him as he drew close. “*Ciao*, Leonardo! How are you today?” He noticed the bandage on Leonardo’s knee. “What happened to you, little one?” Leonardo shrugged.

Lucio approached, knelt down, and pulled away part of the bandage to examine the minor wound. “That’s not too bad. I think you’ll live.” He took a honey jar from his cart and began applying honey to the wound.

Leonardo protested, “Nonna already did that!”

“That’s herb paste, but you can’t beat honey for stopping *infezione*,” Lucio said.

Leonardo winced a little, as his knee was still tender. “Can you put a lot on?” he asked.

Lucio laughed. “So you can eat some of it, eh?” Leonardo laughed with him.

Lucio finished with the honey and replaced the bandage. He took a rag, wrapped a piece of honeycomb, and handed the gift to Leonardo. “And this is to eat.”

Leonardo thanked him and asked, “Lucio, how do bees make honey?” He was as thirsty for knowledge as he was hungry for honey.

“Who knows?” Lucio said, pointing upward. “Those things are best left to God.”

Leonardo looked up and searched the sky. “Where is God? I don’t see him.”

“Leonardo, my boy, you ask too many questions.”

“Too many for what?”

Lucio was at a loss for words.

That night, in Leonardo’s room, a lit candle illuminated a small table that held some of the items Leonardo had picked up in the forest. Moonlight shone through the window onto the walls and the furniture. From outside came the sounds of the night. Crickets chirped, a dog howled, and somewhere, someone played a lute—badly. Oblivious to all this, Leonardo sketched an animal bone on a piece of paper. He turned the bone at different angles to understand its three-dimensionality.

Hanging on the wall beside his crude bed were ambitious but imperfect sketches of trees, plants, flowers, animals, and landscapes. A short length of pig intestine hung from another wall, blown up like a balloon, a funny face drawn on it in ink. A hat with a feather hung from a nail. Waiting in a corner was Leonardo’s backlog: several sacks full of what he viewed as life’s mysteries, yet to be plumbed. A lizard climbed out of one and hid in a corner.

Finished with his sketch, Leonardo sat back, yawned, smiled, and admired the moon. “*Que bella luna,*” he said to himself. He climbed into bed and went to sleep.

# Chapter Three

## FLORENCE

Years went by, and Leonardo became a handsome youth of fifteen. On a sunny day in 1467, he stood with his father at the crest of a hill overlooking Florence. The city sparkled in the afternoon sun. The river Arno curved sensuously, caressing its banks as it flowed through the middle of town.

Leonardo felt that this day would change his life. All his senses were at their height. He noticed everything: the intense blue of the sky, the breeze on his cheek, the birds singing in the trees. His heart swelled at the prospect of what the future might bring.

His father, Piero, had brought him to Florence partly for his own notary business, and partly with a view to accomplishing a specific goal: giving Leonardo a start in life. In that moment, Leonardo felt he was truly and fully his father's son. He pushed from his mind any thought that their closeness might be only temporary.

A rarity in a country torn by incessant wars between city-states, Florence was resplendent in its economic stability. Its painted walls glowed in mellow contentment, and its uniformly

red-tiled roofs seemed to hold the promise of beautiful adventures.

To Leonardo, Florence was a wondrous spectacle, a treasure chest full of dreams. Here, his hard work—by now, he had created thousands of drawings—would come to fruition. Here, he would pursue the life of an artist, someone whose talent was needed and wanted by wealthy patrons and well-funded clergymen. Here, he could continue his quest to know everything there was to know.

“Here, I can breathe,” he thought to himself. “No one will taunt me for my illegitimate birth, or my lack of formal education.”

As for Piero, he would do what he could to secure a future for his son. Although he never married Leonardo’s mother, a servant girl, he felt responsible for Leonardo. Maybe the boy could be an artist after all. His chances were certainly better in Florence than in Vinci.

The two returned to the wagon that held all of Leonardo’s worldly possessions. Piero shook the reins, and the mule plodded down the trail toward the city. He chose his words carefully, masking his emotions. “As you know, Leonardo, I have a sizable clientele here as a notary. Perhaps you can make a living here as well, through your drawing.”

Leonardo smiled. “Thank you, Papa, for bringing me on this trip with you. I won’t forget your kindness.”

“To enter the painters’ guild should be your aim,” Piero continued briskly. “Your talent needs guidance. I pray that my friend and client, Verrocchio, will take you as an apprentice. He is a well-respected master in Florence.”

“I’ll be worthy of your favor, Papa. Where will we live?”

“I’ve rented a house across the piazza from the Hall of the Five Hundred, where the leaders of Florence meet.”

Leonardo was silent. Piero glanced sideways at him. “Do you already miss the woods and the fields?” he asked.

“No, Papa,” Leonardo said. “I’ll find my place here.”

When they reached the city gates, the guards, who knew Piero, let them enter without any formalities. Slowly, they made their way through throngs of pedestrians, wagons, hawkers, food stalls, priests, and beggars. The market stalls contained animals of every kind, shape, and size. Leonardo was fascinated by the *mélange* of sights, sounds, smells, and tableaux, a never-ending stream of human activity. Wanting to draw everything, he reached for his sketchbook, then remembered it was packed away in the wagon behind him. He vowed to store everything in his mind for later.

Piero smiled at his son’s fascination. “A little different than Vinci, eh?”

Thrilled, Leonardo could only utter, “*Certo!*”

## Chapter Four

### VERROCCHIO

Piero and Leonardo stood before one of the most famous art studios in Florence, the source of works that drew clients from all over Europe and even Russia. They were in a part of the city that was home to numerous workshops and studios of artists and craftsmen. Here there were no fetid odors of animals or rotting produce.

The studio belonged to Andrea del Verrocchio, an artist in his mid-thirties and already famous as a painter, sculptor, and goldsmith. He had been nicknamed Verrocchio (“true eye”) by an admiring patron. His real name, known to Piero, his notary, was Andrea di Michele di Francesco de’ Cioni. The wags of Florence joked that the artist’s real name was too much of a mouthful for the patron. The nickname let the patron save considerable breath when introducing the artist at parties.

In the uniquely mellow sunshine of a Tuscan afternoon, apprentices stood in a fenced-off yard in front of the studio. They worked diligently on marble busts, figures, and a few reliefs. Leonardo was impressed with the variety, quantity, and quality of their output. As the apprentices chiseled, chips flew

off the blocks, landed on the flagstones, and were swept up by an assistant.

Two apprentices were taking a break from their labors. They talked and laughed as they ate bread and cheese and drank wine. One of them recognized Piero and smiled.

“*Ciao*, Ser Piero! You came from Vinci today?”

“*Ciao*, Aristotele!” Piero answered. “Yes, we have just arrived.” With something resembling pride, he added, “This is my son, Leonardo. Is your master inside?”

“*Si, certo!* I will tell him you’re here. Would you like some bread and cheese?”

“No, *grazie*,” Piero said.

Aristotele looked at Leonardo. “And you?”

Leonardo nodded. “Yes, please. I’m hungry.”

Aristotele tore off a chunk of dark bread, added a slice of mozzarella, and handed it to Leonardo. The two shook hands.

“Your name is Aristotele?” Leonardo said. “Your parents had great hopes, eh?”

The apprentice laughed. “I’m afraid I’ve disappointed them.” He turned to fetch his master.

Newcomers to Verrocchio’s studio were put off at first by his seemingly aloof manner. Once they were introduced to him, they found him to be warm and cordial with a hint of familiarity—qualities that were useful in gaining new clientele.

When a scowling face appeared at the studio’s entrance, Leonardo was more curious than wary. Growing up in Vinci, he had observed many inconsistencies in human behavior. As Piero and Verrocchio embraced and his father made the introductions, Leonardo thought that someone like Verrocchio was

preferable to an overly friendly stranger who later turned out to be a backstabber.

Verrocchio's large, bustling studio was a source of wonder to Leonardo. Everywhere he looked, apprentices were busy with paintings, sculptures, and gold and brass ornaments. They glanced at him briefly, then went back to work.

Verrocchio saw the look in Leonardo's eyes. To Piero, he said, "What have we here? The next generation of notaries?"

Without waiting for his father to reply, Leonardo spoke up. "I'm a painter." In truth, he aspired to be a painter. So far, he had only made drawings. He knew nothing about painting.

"I see," Verrocchio said. "But are you a hard worker? There are many in Florence who call themselves painters but don't have enough self-discipline to paint a block of wood."

Leonardo felt his self-confidence waver. Aristotele, who had come inside to watch, winked at him. Leonardo said to Verrocchio, "Give me a block of wood and I will show you."

Verrocchio laughed. Piero scolded his son, "Don't bother him with such things."

But Verrocchio looked approvingly at Leonardo and then at his father. "Your son has spirit, even if he turns out to have no talent."

"He has both, my friend. He almost scared me to death one day with a mask of Medusa he created. Andrea, I am hoping you might take him as an apprentice."

Verrocchio seemed to consider Piero's request, as if he hadn't known it was coming. "Hmmm," he said, scratching his chin. "It seems you can frighten people, young man, but can you also give them pleasure by making things of beauty?"

"I like that much better," Leonardo said.

“Then there is some hope for you,” Verrocchio replied. To Piero, he said, “I welcome your son as my apprentice.” He turned back to Leonardo. “And you, my young friend, get ready for some long, hard work and little pay.”

Verrocchio took them back to his office, where he kept a fine brandy for special occasions.

Leonardo learned fast. In two years, he absorbed and applied every technique and principle that had made Verrocchio a success in the Florentine art world. He moved through the studio, observing, copying, improving upon, and grasping everything, just as he had swept through the forests of Vinci, learning all the forest had to offer.

On any given day, Leonardo could be found mixing paints (and experimenting with new mixtures), chiseling marble, painting a minor figure in a crowd scene, sketching another apprentice as he worked, painting the rocks in the background of an altarpiece, being instructed on a painting detail by another apprentice, or being coached by Verrocchio himself on the background face in a portrait. Later, when Leonardo was a senior apprentice, the master allowed him to paint the robes in a portrait of a notable clergyman. Eventually, he had Leonardo paint more of the secondary faces in his commissions.

Almost from the start, a mutual admiration and trust existed between apprentice and master. Often, at the end of a day’s work, the two retired to Verrocchio’s office for brandy and conversation. Verrocchio came to recognize the depth and sharpness of Leonardo’s mind. Nothing was beyond the scope of the young man’s inquiry. He wanted to know how everything worked. The

more he read, the more he wanted to know, and the more questions he asked—questions Verrocchio could not begin to answer.

Sometimes, late at night, Verrocchio would marvel at Leonardo's excited eyes as he rattled off questions or theories. Scientific, philosophical, religious, aesthetic: they flowed from him like a rushing river.

"This young man has completely eclipsed me in thought and word," Verrocchio mused to himself one day. "Soon, with his paintings, he will eclipse me in deed as well. He will be the greatest artist ever produced on the Italian peninsula. Art students will come to my studio not to view my work but to ask, 'Your apprentice, Leonardo da Vinci...what was he like?'"

Verrocchio knew it was just a matter of time before Leonardo left the nest to which his notary and friend Piero had led him. A lesser person would have been jealous of Leonardo, or might have attempted to squelch his talent, but Verrocchio wasn't like that.

One night, in an attempt to forestall the inevitable, he offered Leonardo a full partnership in his studio.

"Maestro, you honor me greatly," Leonardo replied. "But I fear I owe you too much already for what you have taught me. I could never accept this."

Verrocchio sighed. "All right. Let's have another drink. But I won't give up so easily."