

Beate Teresa Hanika / Susanne Hanika:

Jenseits des Schattentores

Beyond the Gate of Shadows

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Prologue

‘That’s the last time!’ The god of the underworld sent a lightning flash of such powerful brilliance through the Hall of Stone that the man standing before him flinched and ducked.

‘He’s still so young...’ he ventured to object, once the smoke had subsided, leaving behind only the odour of burnt bone and brimstone.

‘What’s he doing now?’

‘He’s sleeping, sir. I’ve tried to wake him but all he did was throw a shoe at me.’

The god’s face darkened.

‘But it’s not that bad, really not that bad. He missed me. However, he didn’t want to go to his Greek class. He’s too tired to study at the moment. The time can be made up. When the young god...’

‘He’s too tired because he’s roaring around too much on Earth. A real good-for-nothing.’

'...when the young god has caught up on his sleep,' the man concluded with a reassuring smile.'

The god leapt up and used his foot to nudge the huge black dog off the mass of furs scattered across the floor round his throne.

'We'll punish him, Praefectus!' he pronounced.

'Don't call me Praefectus!' the tutor ventured in objection once more.

All he got in reply was a snort.

The man hurried along as fast as he could in the god's wake but even with his best efforts, he couldn't keep pace. They crossed the Hall, moved swiftly through countless corridors, the black dog always hot on their heels. Eventually they reached the bed chambers where the god of the underworld determinedly flung open his son's bedroom door. Harrumphing with rage, he stared at the scene now before him. Here was the young god, outstretched on mounds of cushions, stark naked, his mouth slightly open as he slept, a gentle frown wrinkling his brow, and the shape of his lips provoked the strangest feeling in his father's belly.

He's got his mother's lips, he thought to himself. The same nose. The same stubbornness.

'Don't be too hard on him,' begged the Praefektor, looking away in embarrassment so as to avoid full sight of the young god in his birthday suit.

'He will lose his divine status if he has nothing more in his head than having a good time and too many women. And do you know what that means, my friend?'

The tutor concurred, his flat face grew even more pale and anxious and he lifted his arms beseechingly.

'No! Please! Not that! That means he'll die. As his tutor, his advocate, I cannot allow that to happen!'

'So what exactly do you suggest, you goblin?'

'Give him another chance! One more!'

Looking full of thought, the god rested his chin on his hand. His son's breathing was deep and even. Wine bottles were littered around his place of slumber, as was an overflowing ashtray and a badly made nude statue, its head missing.

'He doesn't deserve that,' said the god, darkly, 'so I shall set him three tasks to perform, or he will pay with his life...'

Chapter One

31 March, the day on which Aurora climbed to the highest point of the Colosseum, was chased into Via di San Saba by carabinieri and managed to escape through the kitchen of a Vietnamese restaurant on Piazza Bernini.

It's not so easy for an elderly goddess like me to sit back and watch the way people carry on. They're short-tempered and unreasonable, fight over silly things and, through their other shortcomings, make life far harder than it should be. It's not easy for me to look at all this and I can't watch over every single one of them, so, to be perfectly honest, I sometimes hang a black cloth over my silver ball in the daytime because the way they all gossip, overdramatise and behave so idiotically only gives me a terrible headache. Although I know this means I'm neglecting my duties, I'd far sooner gaze at the clouds, let myself sink into the calm of the ocean, or revel in a clear and starry night.

But not on the morning of 12 August in the year 2013 A.D.

Just working out which year it was makes me put my head in my hands. 2013 A.D.! Oh ye gods of Olympus! Time can't be counted up, held tight, totted up like grains of barley in your hand. Even I myself, older than the very world, older still than much of what's on Earth, cannot remember back to the beginning of time.

Be that as it may. On 12 August for simplicity's sake I removed the cloth from the ball in order to take a careful look at the world before settling down for a nice, peaceful nap in front of my tower. I must admit I'd certainly noticed the girl called Aurora Perrini in the last few weeks. Not that I'm usually interested in individuals. Definitely not.

I discovered Aurora Perrini in the city, the only true city on this planet, in the one metropolis that makes my heart beat faster. I discovered Aurora Perrini in Rome.

The most vibrant spot in Rome is, for me, the Pantheon. Viewed from the outside, this is a huge structure built with roughly hewn bricks, placed in layers with the greatest of care by thousands of human beings, an architectural miracle. For over a thousand years it had the world's largest dome and is dedicated to the gods. There's no getting away from the fact that the Catholic Church then seized the building and, in despair, dedicated it to the blessed Mary. Nothing against the blessed Mary here but inside the Pantheon both Mars and Athene hover around, and Zeus and Neptune reach out for one another. It's no place for divine creatures, more for thieves, beggars and crooks.

In olden times people stood in the middle of the Pantheon and looked upwards at the dome through which they could see the heavens above Rome, and they would sense our divine energy running through their bodies. Wishes offered up to the universe were granted, pain was soothed, illnesses cured.

And today? Today this spot is roped off by thick, red cord. People are forbidden from prostrating themselves on the ground even though this special energy is too strong

for a human to withstand. People are forbidden from undressing – surely you were aware of that? The gods love nudity and are usually more than happy to disport themselves, or certainly did when the Earth was fresh and new.

It was there that I saw her.

Rather hurriedly, nearly stumbling over a beggar woman, she came through the doors flanked by pillars, her jet-black hair a mass of curls hanging almost to her waist. I admit it was her hair that made me stop and look because it was like mine before the silver streaks crept in.

Perrini. Aurora. Seventeen and a half. How many seventeen year old girls are there on Earth? How many disasters and difficulties are occasioned by these seventeen year old creatures on their way to the boredom of adulthood when they stand, tamed and without inspiration, at the side of a man quite unworthy of them?

But enough of that.

11.55. Exactly five minutes before the hour.

Everything was going to plan. Although Aurora Perrini would usually steer clear of the Pantheon – she always ended up with such pressure in her right ear that she thought she was going down with some illness – she hoped it would be alright this time. She slipped past the custodian, the green velvet bag pressed to her belly as if she feared being robbed, her gaze turned heavenwards with everybody around her. Determinedly she made her way towards the central point of this huge room, the part that was roped off by the red cord. Ignoring the custodian, she slipped beneath it, positioned herself right in the centre and looked upwards. That wasn't part of the plan but she loved this majestic sight, the rays of sunshine which seemed to penetrate the roof aperture directly from the heavens, together with the *shreee shreee* of the swifts free to disregard all barriers, disappearing as quickly as they had appeared through the opening.

When she saw the custodian approaching her, she ducked quickly under the red cord but bumped into him. He grasped her shoulder, then let her go once he'd seen her slender oval face and dark eyes with their lustrous lashes. He gave her a warning shake of the head but she disappeared into the throng without saying a word, her heart pounding.

Aurora didn't need to re-read her assignment this time.

12 August. 12 noon. Let the Pantheon be your target. Seek out Raffael's tomb, touch the ground. Touch the toes of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God whose statue is directly opposite and, above all, touch the floor behind her.

Messages like this always sounded really mysterious and occasionally completely meaningless, unfortunately, but Aurora knew deep down this wasn't so. Her assignments were never meaningless. After each and every one she had a sense of

achievement. There'd come a time when she'd bring together the first loose thread and the last and wonder why on earth she hadn't understood straight away.

The custodian had disappeared.

Raffael's tomb was now lit up.

And, what's more, the gracious Maria del Sasso was there.

Aurora didn't look back now. She slipped beneath this barrier, too, swiftly touched the statue's toes, one by one, and then the floor behind. In her hand, a ten cent coin and on her face, a broad smile. For several beats she gazed into Maria's face and, although she knew it was foolish to let time slip by, she did precisely that, and, as her pulse raced her father came to the forefront of her mind again, his disturbingly distracted behaviour of the last few days. His limp seemed to have got worse and he hadn't been into the university for ages.

Why?

At the same moment the shrill sound of a whistle could be heard, the general murmur of voices suddenly got louder and Aurora's heart pounded as she slipped underneath the rope again, fought her way energetically through the throng of tourists in the direction of the exit, unperturbed by the fact that people were trying to grab hold of her jacket rather than get out of her way.

Then she found herself up against a *carabiniere*. She managed to dodge his grasp and started to run. Her heart in her mouth, she raced down Via della Rotonda which turns later into Via di Torre Argentine. To her surprise the *carabiniere* was right behind her and the effortlessness with which she would usually outrun any pursuer had failed her. She turned down a side street and pressed her body against the wall, trying to make herself invisible. The pressure inside her ear was so strong she had to swallow hard several times, and her temples throbbed. What had she been thinking of, lingering by the statue for so long? What was it her Professor had drummed into her? *Fast, accurate, invisible*. Aurora bit her lip. It was all because of her father that she lacked concentration. And the heat here in Rome.

Then the *carabiniere* ran right past her.

Trembling, she waited until he'd gone round the corner. Then she left her hiding place and sped across Corso Vittorio Emanuele.

Maybe she was too old for these little games. She'd reached that age of wanting answers and not being fobbed off. Leaning against the wall, she drew the notebook out of the green velvet bag and neatly poised the pencil over the page. Normally she would record her course of action, how hard it had been to reach the prescribed place, what had happened, whether she'd succeeded in getting there without being spotted, whether the police had stopped her...this time she wrote only one word:

Why?

This done, she pushed her hands in the pockets of the man's baggy jacket she was wearing and walked unhurriedly towards the Basilica di Santa Maria Trastevere.

Once in front of an unremarkable house, badly in need of redecoration, Aurora took her key out of her jacket pocket, opened the door and went up the stairs at a leisurely pace. It was cool and peaceful in the apartment. Still perspiring from the incident in the Pantheon, Aurora went into the kitchen, filled a large glass with cold water and drank it down in one. When she stopped to listen, she noticed how abnormally silent the house was, as if it was holding its breath. Only then did she realise what was missing. In recent months her father had often been here instead of going into the Università La Sapienza, where he was Professor of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology. Instead he'd been pacing gloomily back and forth in his study at home, deep in thought, and downstairs you could hear his limp, the gentle shuffling sound of his bad foot and the firm tread of the good foot. But today there was silence.

She stepped into the dining room and stopped dead. Her father was sitting at the table, staring at his hands as they rested on it.

'Papá?'

He went on looking at his hands. 'Signora Mirabel from the first floor saw you yesterday at Basilica Minerva,' he said, as if they were already in the middle of a conversation. 'She was at confession.'

'Is there some rule against going to church?' Aurora folded her arms defiantly.

'No, there isn't. Provided one is not then pursued by the custodian and the police.'

Now he did look up and they both held one another's gaze for some time until she turned away and lowered her eyes. The business at the Basilica Minerva had been a breeze. The *carabinieri* hadn't even got within touching distance of her.

'I don't want to know why. I only want you to grow up a decent human being.'

'It won't happen again,' said Aurora, so softly she could barely be heard. What she was really thinking was 'that's not what this is about. Who's seen me where and that I'm not brought home by the police'.

'I've been thinking it over. I'd like you to leave Rome for a while, so I've been on the phone to Aunt...'

'To Aunt?' Aurora burst out.

Her Aunt Lorena was her mother's step-sister but they just referred to her as 'Aunt' and absolutely the last thing she or her father wanted was to see her in person.

'That'll be best.'

'*Aunt!*' Aurora said again, stunned. She felt a fear she couldn't explain prickling along her spine. If her father wanted to send her to Aunt, then something very bad must be brewing. Something that meant she had to disappear. Something life-threatening. Aurora had no idea where this sense of certainty came from. It was just there.

'This is no place for you. I bring you up but only after a fashion...'

'It's all OK,' she cut across him, while her own thought processes were interrupted by the fear which had suddenly intensified.

'It isn't OK. Your mother wouldn't have wanted it this way.'

The silence that followed was so complete that slightest sound seemed deafening: the ticking of the cuckoo clock, laughter from passers-by, the cooing of doves on the window-ledge. Aurora turned to the window then looked back at her father again, and lowered her head so that her fall of curls obscured her face. More than anything, her mother would not have wanted her to grow up at her Aunt's house.

'So where is she?'

Now it was her father's turn to lower his head and stare at the table.

'I want to know the truth once and for all,' she persisted.

'She's dead.'

'You're lying.'

Her father looked at her steadily and she saw something uncertain in his eyes. But then he, too, turned away again. Without a word.

'And tell me, once and for all, what happened to your leg.'

'I had an accident. You know that.'

Aurora was dismissive. Accident! She'd have accepted that as a small child. But not now.

'An accident? It was like this. You, Terenghi and Fernando are off out somewhere. Then the hospital phones Signora Mirabel and tells her you're going to lose a leg and that Terenghi and Fernando are seriously injured. After that there's me at Signora Mirabel's for seven weeks and nobody tells me anything about anything. What was it? A car? An animal? A person?'

'A dog. It was a dog.'

'A dog?' Aurora stared at her father in disbelief.

'What kind of a dog could hurt you like that?'

'It was a huge dog...but that's by the by. Rome is no place for a young girl. Not for a girl like you, with a father like me,' he said evasively, and rubbed both hands against his forehead, accentuating all the wrinkles, then scratched at his bushy eyebrows.

'I'm old enough for you to talk to me properly. And not tell me lies.'

'You'll never be old enough for this. And besides. Who knows what you get up to the whole day when I'm out at the university?' He was on the offensive now.

'I go to Professor Fernando's. And Professor Terenghi's. Your two best friends' places. You know that perfectly well.'

'Both of whom fill your head with nonsense. And what had you been looking for in Parco di Colle Oppio?

Aurora looked at him in amazement, her eyes wide. In the park?

'I was reading,' she replied, truthfully, while fear gripped her like a vice.

'By the fountain,' he responded, reproachfully.

'Why not?' She enjoyed the magnetic attraction of this particular park, loved sitting under the trees with her book, closing her eyes and daydreaming that they were complete once more as a family, that her mother was standing in front of her, would take her by the hand and return to her father.

If only her father could be as happy again as he had been with her mother...

'I forbid you to do that!' he hissed at her and she shrank before the rage in his eyes. 'I forbid you to do that. And that's that!'

Sitting in that park was completely harmless! She looked at him in disbelief. Tell me why, she was thinking. I'll do everything you say if you'll only tell me why...

'I'm nearly eighteen,' she said rather combatively, not her usual style at all. 'I can do what I choose.'

'So until you are eighteen, you will do what I say. And by the time you really are eighteen, you will have grown accustomed to living at Aunt's house.'

'Forget it,' retorted Aurora. 'I'll go to that park as often as I want. Besides...you just tell me the truth. Why you don't want me to go there...'

'You will stay here until you come to your senses!' he shouted at her and drove her into her room.'

So much for men and how they deal with their daughters. They see a young girl as they would a wild horse which has to learn to take the halter and lead rein, and which, with a bit of patience, becomes manageable and can forget its origins, can forget the sound of its own hooves galloping across the plain, forget the wind on its muzzle and the glorious sense of freedom.

This was exactly how Laura Perrini's father thought. When she yelled back that if that was what he wanted then he wouldn't ever see her again, I knew he didn't believe her and that he felt he was doing the right thing when he locked her door behind her while she hurled insults at him. He didn't believe her, but I did. I saw how she pulled a green velvet bag out from under her bed and stuffed it any old how with masses of clothes. She picked up her diary and threw that in, too, taking a quick look inside it first.

She'd awakened my curiosity.

My sightings of the world are so fleeting they border on the neglectful, I must admit, but now I let myself be absorbed into Aurora Perrini's room, listened to the self-control in her breathing and sensed her rage.

I sat back and lit a cigarette, a disagreeable activity that I took up in my twenties when all the world and his wife used to smoke and everyone thought it was incredibly smart. The smoke obscured the silver ball. Was this Aurora Perrini weeping? Was she really running her hand over the soft material that made up the bag? Oh world, you're not a good place for a young girl but not such a bad place for someone in search of an adventure.

For me a half day is over in a flash. Not for Aurora. I could see she was turning over in her mind whether what she was planning was right. But I already knew, just knew, what she would decide and it gave me a certain delight. It was the delight of someone who no longer has any desire to break out and leave home.

The sun was sinking towards the horizon. Rome's narrow streets began to fill with evening crowds welcoming the close of day. Aurora buried her face in the velvet bag and breathed in its familiar smell. When she looked up once more, it was clear from her face she'd decided. Of course, I already had an idea of what she was planning. She would hurry through the darkening streets with such elegance and grace, take all the steps with such agility, speed past the fountain, following Rome's lights and shadows on the same ancient routes taken by Roman women in search of freedom. No city could have better escape routes than this one.

Just as I thought, she got decisively to her feet, listened briefly at the door, heard nothing, so went to the open window and swung through first one leg, then the other, and was soon down on the Via della Lungaretta, determinedly weaving her way through the happy, laughing crowds as they strolled in search of food and fun.

I lamented the failure of all the men to notice her, to wolf whistle in appreciation, to turn and look at her fabulous hair, her Roman profile, her full lips which couldn't help but give away a little smile regardless of her mood. They were just philistines incapable of recognising true beauty, all because she liked to shroud herself in unattractive clothes. They'd rather look at a pair of misshapen legs, as long as they're naked, than use their imagination to picture hidden beauty. But that's always been the case. Time has done nothing to change that.

Now and again I lost sight of her. The fire-eater dazzled me, a juggler lost count when I gave him an angry look, and two women fell into an argument as Aurora brushed past them.

Only Aurora remained unaffected by my watchful eyes, perhaps because she was preoccupied by the conversation with her father.

I'd always thought she was dead, her mind kept saying. That's what they told me back then after the awful accident which changed our lives so dramatically. *She can't be saved*. That single sentence was burnt into her soul. She'd believed it, of course. But now the thought that her mother could still be alive made her emotions race.

She ran past all the little souvenir shops with their braided strings of garlic and pepperoni wreaths. She ran on and on, down Via della Paglia, across Piazza Santa Maria, then back onto Via della Lungaretta and down towards the Tiber.

My pulse beat faster when I realised she intended crossing the river at Ponte Garibaldi. I smelt the river long before I saw it and, while I'd been very eager to track my protégée this far, I was now quite disconcerted. Something was telling me this was not good. That something was drawing her to the last place I wanted her to be.

'Turn back,' I said to her, and that mane of hair swished as she turned her head when halfway across the bridge, annoyed by my words which had certainly got through to her in spite of the adventurous spirit driving her on. But she didn't turn back. She went faster instead.

When she reached the Monti Fountain and paused briefly on the steps, even I could sense the maelstrom sucking her in. She looked up at the Chiesa Madonna dei Monti. In my anger, I made all the lantern lights flicker so that everything was bathed in a romantic glow. Aurora was looking elsewhere. Right next to her, and stuck to the fountain, was a well-concealed slip of paper and before I could do anything, she'd read it.

'Looking for a tenant,' she whispered, inaudibly for everybody except me. It hit me with the power of a thunderbolt.

No! The moment I saw the address, my hackles went up. *You will not read this note to the end.*

A gust of wind caught the paper, she tried to grab it, I made it blow further but the circus clown snatched it from the air and handed it to her with a ridiculously elaborate bow. Couldn't she see this was no circus clown? That he was acting as an agent, *his* agent?

No, she couldn't see that, of course she couldn't.

She smiled gently in thanks and then read the address. Furious, I puffed again and made the note blow into the fountain and sink straight away. The wet ink was instantly illegible.

I sat back, pleased with my work.

But Aurora still wouldn't turn back. Tears stood in her eyes but there was no stopping her. Had she taken in the address?

When she did set off in that direction I spirited the thief to her side. She was naïve and didn't realise why this character was getting so close to her. All it needed was a shove and her mother's green velvet bag was gone, snatched by a passing scoundrel.

I know I shouldn't have done it. Both these actions were against our principles. But I'd done it so skilfully nobody would know that this robber hadn't stolen from Aurora off his own bat.

I stood with my arms folded and watched while she followed the thief, cursing him until he was out of sight. She was so beautiful. The way she turned, pressed her arms firmly against her sides and kept her eyes tightly closed.

What?

Isn't this enough?

Evidently not. She carried on running but not in the direction I had feared. Instead she turned off into the darkness of a park.

This wasn't any old park, either. This was the park where, a few centuries ago, I had gone walking more than anywhere in the whole of Rome, or anywhere in the world for that matter. Full of anticipation, wistfulness, anger, and, yes, love, too. I held my breath but Aurora had run past the fountain as if she had never seen it. Tears of rage stood in her eyes but her face was set. At the far end of the park she vanished into a crowd of people once more, letting them sweep her along with them and I heaved a sigh of relief. For a moment I even thought the mass of humanity would sweep her away from the place I wanted to forget.

But the throng deposited her right in front of the very house with the address I'd tried to wipe from my mind, with the façade I'd tried to forget, with the continuing presence I'd tried to turn into a permanent absence.

By now I was in turmoil.

Surely she would realise this was no place for her? None of the other houses looked so horrible.

The plasterwork was flaking and the graffiti emblazoned across the wall near the main door was just evil. But what was she up to? Her eyes wide, she was studying the savage, grotesque faces carved all over the dark wooden door. I was deeply unsettled to see how fascinated she was, drawn by such strange and alien ugliness. Couldn't she see what was going on here? Couldn't she see where she was? That it wasn't goodness that drew her here?

I hated this building. I didn't want to remember anything to do with this door, to do with *him*.

Aurora, get out of here!

But she put her hand on the heavy door-knocker, hesitating as if she wasn't sure whether to use it or not. It was black, worn, shaped like a skull and fitted the palm of her hand like an amulet. Once again she looked up and beyond the door to the large, darkened windows.

'You really don't want to stay here, my treasure, believe me,' I whispered.

But then she let fall the door-knocker on the highly ornate surface. Nobody heard her, of course. The house was more dead than alive. It was one enormous grave. And I wouldn't be following her into it. If she crosses this threshold, then she'll be alone with whatever problems make themselves felt there. And they would, believe you me...

She pushed open the door, gingerly crossed the threshold and, although I didn't want to go after her, I couldn't bring myself to look away. This was no longer simply

an adventure, this was the first step towards doom. It was my duty to distract her from going to the third floor.

She slid open the latticework door of the lift and got in. She pressed the button for the third floor. The lift started. I briskly tinkered with its workings and it got stuck at the second floor. There was nothing more I could do.

Then I saw the dwarf on the third floor. He had an affected, self-assured manner and was constantly talking to a man standing silently behind him. I somehow didn't want Aurora to have any contact with the quiet fellow. I don't know why but even from here I could sense she was going to be drawn to him. He was so good-looking any woman would go weak at the knees.

The lift creaked into motion again, then stopped between the second and third floors, thanks be to the gods, and just hung there.