

CURSEBREAKER

THE ORDER OF THE SCROLLS SERIES

CURSEBREAKER

NANCY WENTZ


WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Scripture quotations are taken from the
King James Version of the Holy Bible.

CURSEBREAKER

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DEDICATION

To Mickey and Christian.

Soli Deo Gloria.

PROLOGUE

Winter, 1565

Italy

Aturbulent wind assaulted the night, moaning through the graveyard, enjoining dead leaves to swirl about his feet. He steadied his lantern, squinting at the tombstones that stretched before him. They rose like apparitions, enlivened by the shadows of barren trees caught in the light. Twigs clutched at his hooded cloak. He pulled at them impatiently.

Stealing upon a humble grave, laid amidst murderers, paupers, and the unbaptized, he knelt to decipher the etchings. Worn by time, the tombstone almost denied him the name of its dead. He pushed back his cowl and traced the engraving with his finger.

Frate Domenicano Salvatore Ansaldo

1471—1550

Dio ha la compassione sulla sua anima maledetta

Swinging a canvas bag from his shoulder, he extracted from it a shovel and a pickax. He tossed his cloak over the tombstone. The night air felt good against his flesh as he labored to exhume the grave.

He stopped once at a sound. His dark eyes scanned the eerie monuments leaning askew before him—silent witnesses watching without eyes, listening without ears, curious and

Cursebreaker

apprehensive at his presence. Ignoring the uneasiness that stiffened the hair on his arms, he continued digging.

The shovel struck the coffin with a hollow thud. He fell to his knees, swept the dirt from the box, and grabbed the pickax, stabbing the corroded wood repeatedly until the lid lifted with no more resistance than a groan. The stench of mold permeated the air. He reached for the lantern, which reflected off the shaved crown of his head. Startled shadows leaped from the grave like souls before the judgment.

Death had paid the Dominican friar no homage. It had robbed him of his flesh and feasted on his bones. Fragments of the burial shroud remained adhered to their owner, as did gray hair to his skull. His gaping mouth, lacking several teeth, protested in silence the desecration of his grave.

Upon the corpse lay a wooden crucifix, the rosary entwining the fingers. The robber scanned the body, hesitantly patting the shroud. Finding nothing, the hope of discovery waned until he slipped his hands beneath the corpse. At his touch, the rib cage crumpled, rippling around his wrists as he delved, until his fingers grasped two scrolls. Shaking off the human remains, he placed the scrolls in the bag, climbed from the hole, and reburied the defiled dead.

He made haste to the monastery. In his cell, he barred the door and released his cowl to the floor. After lighting several candles to alleviate the darkness, he pulled the scrolls from the bag, gingerly spreading them across a wooden table. Though they had lain in the grave with corrupting flesh, he was amazed to find them unsullied, written upon with an odd shade of russet ink. He drew a candle closer. Choosing one, he read:

*Et ait ei tibi dabo potestatem hanc universam et
gloriam illorum quia mihi tradita sunt et cui volo
do illa tu ergo si adoraveris coram me erunt tua omnia.*

Nancy Wentz

The pounding of his heart quickened. The legend was true—he had found the scrolls.

The Gregorian chant of distant choristers broke the early morning silence. He gasped—he had forgotten the Eucharist! He glanced at the painting on the stone wall, the fair Madonna enfolding the Christ Child in her arms, then looked back at the scroll. The reddish ink was smudged. He peered at it suspiciously. His eyes widened. *Blood*. It was written in blood.

*Invitarme che cerca il potere e la fortuna
nell'abbondanza. Invitarme che cerca i misteri
del buio. Inviterà Lucifer.*

Chills crept up his back. He crossed himself. Were not these words against the sacred Scripture? It was blasphemy. Heresy. Was he not risking his soul? Yet the words were so clear; did they not offer him the world? He glanced at the Madonna and Child again, then back at the scroll. The garnet rosary about his neck tapped against the table.

*Chiunque invita Lucifer offrirà la sua anima,
e ciò del secondo maschio nella sua casa per
tutte le generazioni.*

All the power of the world and the glory thereof was at his fingertips—his, Luccio Frattarelli—the abbot of the church of the Spirito Santo. With the heightening of his voice, the words fell from his lips:

*La mia fedeltà, la mia anima, il mio corpo
che do a Lucifer. Invito Lucifer a essere il
mio padrone. Visito il suo demone potentemente,
Il Governatore del Rotolo, vivere nel mio corpo.*

Death took Luccio by surprise. The scroll slipped from his hands as he grasped at his heart. He tumbled backward over a chair, his sandaled feet kicking the floor in wild succession. A trembling cold seized his frame, congealing the blood in his

Cursebreaker

veins. Then, struck with the conviction of his fate, his eyes opened in terror upon the Madonna and Child, and his breath ceased.

Moments passed as he lay there, his body not feeling the cold morning air. Then, a blistering gust swirled through the cell, scorching the wood, singeing the cowl, burning the painted images beyond recognition. The eyelids began to flutter, the eyebrows to twitch, the chest to rise and fall with regular breathing. The muscles in the arms and legs stretched as if released from bondage.

When the eyes opened, the life behind them was not that of Luccio Frattarelli.

 ONE

Winter, 1931

Colorado, United States of America

A scream escaped the boy's lips. The startling pain across his left ear and cheek jerked his head to the side. His eyes snapped open. Looking around with the shocked confusion of broken sleep, he cringed to see the black pillar leaning over his bed.

"I ain't done nothin', Pa!"

"Get up."

He glanced out the window. A breath of air shook the broken pane, scraping the ice-frosted curtains against each other. Beyond them, the stars were bright against the sky.

"I ain't heard the rooster—"

Even as he spoke, he threw up his arms to shield his face. The hand came down hard against his head. It knocked his arms out of the way and found his throbbing ear once more.

"Get up, or I'll throw you down those stairs."

Shielding his ear, he strove to sit up. It wasn't fast enough. That hand seized him—

"No!"

—yanked him from his narrow bed—

"Not the stairs again!"

—and flung him toward the bedroom door. The blanket strangled his feet. He reeled across the floor, collided with the

Cursebreaker

washstand, and fell on his back. Wresting away the blanket, he just escaped his father's boots as they stomped an inch from his fingers.

"Start the fire."

Coiled against the wall, he watched his father's rigid silhouette leave the room. He listened to the tread on the staircase, the steps through the kitchen below, and the slam of the back door. All was silent. Only then did he move. He stood on trembling legs, the warped floorboards creaking beneath his weight.

Testing the movement of his jaw, he cupped his ear and swallowed against the pain that traveled down his neck. His face felt hot.

"You all right?" a voice whispered from the darkness.

He looked at his two older brothers lying huddled together under a single blanket. The head of the oldest lifted, his youthful profile barely discernable.

"Yeah." The boy rubbed the bones of his chest through a tear in his long underwear.

"Stay clear of Pa." The profile sank back into the bed. "Today's the day Ma died."

The recollection shocked him. He felt sick to his stomach and wondered how long that pillar had stood over his bed.

Picking up his overalls from the floor, he maneuvered his feet into the threadbare pant legs. While securing the straps to the bib with safety pins, he slipped his naked feet into his boots, scrunching his toes against the cracked soles.

Not having heard the squeak of the back door, he went downstairs without fear, pulling a woolen coat across his shoulders. Finding a lantern burning in the kitchen, he took it and stepped outside.

The November chill seeped through his clothes. He looked at the moon, blew a warm stream of air from his mouth toward it, and watched the steam evaporate. The moon's glow

Nancy Wentz

beautified the farm to a shimmering, snowy landscape, but he saw no beauty there, only the skeleton of the plow, the empty corral, the sinister corner behind the chicken coop—a myriad of hiding places where his father might lurk. It was then his fear returned; somewhere in that darkness was his father.

He crept along the snow-covered path, afraid the sound of his boots would give him away. Placing the lantern by the door of the woodshed, he paused to wipe his bangs out of his eyes, his gaze traveling to the barn set against the open prairie, an expanse of blackness where nothing moved. A lantern burned within, emitting light between the loose-fitting boards. He heard the horse's neigh, the worried screech of a chicken, and the thud of an ax against wood. He had found his father.

Snatching an armload of wood, he ran back inside the house. As he hurried to build a fire in the kitchen stove, his mind raced to find places where he could hide. *The root cellar? No, too easy to be found. What about the barn down the road, or the lake? Yeah, the lake.* He could break through the ice. Maybe if he caught some fish, Pa wouldn't beat him that night.

No sooner had he decided where to run than the warmth of the fire encouraged him to linger. Daring to place an additional stick on the quivering flames, he dragged a chair from the table before the stove. He would run when he heard his father's step on the back porch, but for now, the glow of the crackling wood was too good to leave.

He fell asleep.

He did not hear the steps. He did not hear the door open. For a surreal moment, he hovered between dreaming and waking, feeling the brush of his mother's apron, the smell of bread. Then the door slammed. A rush of air stirred his hair like an icy hand. With a gasp, he spun around. Gazing up into the beardless face, an image flashed in his mind of the scarecrow suspended in the cornfield—that frayed figure no threat of storm could move. He feared its claw-like arms that

Cursebreaker

stretched out for an embrace; he knew well the terror of that embrace. He bolted from the chair, knocking it over.

“Pick it up.”

The words stopped him cold. Returning, he righted the chair, keeping his eyes averted and his hands ready to push it forward if his father made any abrupt movements.

“Sit down.”

He teetered on his feet, debating whether to run out the back door or the front, when he noticed what was in his father’s hands. In one dangled the downy body of a freshly killed chicken; in the other, the bloody cleaver.

He sat down.

“Remember your Ma?” His father tossed the chicken and the cleaver on the table.

“Yeah.” The sight of the headless chicken set off a nervous spasm in his stomach.

“It’s been three years. I reckoned you’d forgot.”

An anxious moment of silence hung between them. Risking a glance, he found his father’s unblinking gaze fixed on him. Yellow flames from the lantern quivered in his green eyes. When he spoke, his mouth revealed the bottom row of his stained teeth.

“She was a good woman. Kept this place nice. Didn’t have much, but she made it stretch.”

Removing his straw hat, he began to pace the floor. The sound of his boots scraping the wood sent a shudder down the boy’s spine. He looked back at the chicken.

“I miss her cookin’. I miss her gettin’ mad when I tracked in dirt. I miss watchin’ her wash her hair and dryin’ it front of the stove. She never fussed over nothin’—” he stopped his deliberate tread, “—except you. ‘My baby’s sick,’ she’d say.”

The hat slipped from his soiled fingers to the floor. He leaned close to the boy’s ear.

“Then you got the fever.”

Nancy Wentz

His father's breath on his neck caused him to look around wildly. His shoulders flinched with expectation.

"She made me sell the cow to pay the doctor. I told her she already had two strong boys. Better to keep the cow. Then *she* got the fever."

The hand seized the boy's neck and squeezed.

"She died...and you got better."

With a jerk, his father spun him around, knocking the chair over. He lifted the boy close to his face.

"Why ain't it *you* rottin' in that graveyard?"

"I'm sorry, Pa." Tears stung the boy's eyes. His chin quivered.

"I should've drowned you in the river like a runt."

The fist rose like a pendulum.

"No! I'm sorry!"

It hailed on his head, cutting short his screams, blurring his vision with flashes of red. He felt his body being thrashed back and forth. The hand twisting his clothing nearly choked off his breath.

"Stop it, Pa!"

The beating stopped. Warmth trickled from his nose and mouth as he sagged in his father's grip. Through the spinning room, he saw his brothers in the doorway in their long underwear, their brown hair mussed.

The oldest stepped forward. "Let him go. It ain't his fault, and you know it."

"He killed her as true as I'm standin' here. He's got every bit of it comin'."

"It ain't his fault, and beatin' him ain't gonna bring her back. Nothin's bringin' her back. She's dead."

Staggering as if struck from behind, he pressed the boy backward against the table, his neck on the chicken's carcass.

"I know! I know, but she was everything...all I had... since we were kids...all I wanted." Anguish creased his tanned

Cursebreaker

forehead. Sobs he could no longer control heaved in his chest until he laid his head on the boy's chest, wailing.

The boy dared not move. He shot his brothers a terrified plea with his eyes, but they, too, stood motionless.

"It ain't right that she died." He lifted his head, his face flushed, wet, the veins in his forehead and neck pulsating. "It ain't right that he lived."

He seized the cleaver and lifted it high.

The boys shrieked in unison, "No!"

Still caught in the trap of that great hand, the boy threw up his arms. Light glinted off the cleaver as it plummeted, its edge slicing across his uplifted palm. He felt no pain, just the keen sensation of his flesh opening, sending a streak of blood across his father's face.

The cleaver rose again. His brothers rushed forward. In a skirmishing blur of hands, he saw the cleaver pushed aside. His father reared back, shouting. Saliva dripped from his lips. One brother fell to the floor. The cleaver rose again. He closed his eyes. Screaming. A crack. A grunt.

He felt himself pulled to the floor by the hand that would not let go. Blood sprayed in every direction as he kicked and screamed, helpless until his brothers freed him and dragged him to the other side of the kitchen.

"Stop squirmin'!"

The oldest held his brother's wrist, forcing open his clenched fingers to inspect the gash while the other tried to soothe him. Too terrified to be calmed, he continued to scream, to struggle, even though his father lay motionless on the floor, the fire poker beside him.

Turning him away from the sight, they held him close until he settled into a quiet sob. The oldest then brought him to his feet. Grabbing a rag from the table, he wiped the tears that rolled down the boy's cheeks.

"Listen," he said, wrapping the rag around the bleeding

Nancy Wentz

hand. "You need your wits. Run away. He'll kill you next time. Go to town. Find Uncle Harald. Here's your cap."

Their father groaned. All stared at him for a silent moment, then rushed to the door.

"Run fast. Don't tell nobody your name. Don't let the sheriff catch you neither. He'll bring you back or put you in the orphanage and work you till you drop dead."

His brothers hugged him, then sent him out into the cold. He ran with one glance back, one final look at his brothers standing in the doorway. Into the darkness he ran, leaving a scattered trail of tears and blood behind.