Florence 1389. A boy is baptized into a medieval world. He was not of noble birth. He was the son of a local merchant. His name was Cosimo de Medici. From humble beginnings, his dynasty would seek power and influence and not stop until they secured the papacy itself. Theirs was a world where power came at a price: intrigue, murder, assassination, and war.

The city of Florence was also a cauldron of creativity. For the greater glory of the family, the Medici would protect and pay for the greatest artists and thinkers of their age: Michelangelo, Brunelleschi, Botticelli, Leonardo, Galileo. An explosion of ideas which would shatter the medieval world and resonate from the centuries in a single phrase: Rinascimento. Rebirth. Renaissance.

Behind it stood the Medici, godfathers on the Renaissance.

--- Cradle of the Renaissance ---

At the dawn of the fifteenth century an illicit trade had begun. Men scoured Europe in search of treasure. Somewhere in the confines of the holy church lay their prize. Not the jewel-encrusted relics or sacred icons of medieval Christendom. Nor were they seeking to loot the bodies of the dead, victims of war and plague. But hidden in the darkest vaults of the church lay a prize far older and more precious and sometimes far more dangerous.

What these men were really after was knowledge. Cosimo de Medici and his friends were searching for lost secrets from the ancient world.

MARCELLO FANTONI: The shared feeling at the time was that the achievements of the classics in many fields, from philosophy to architecture, from rhetoric to sculpture, were unsurpassed.

JAMES SASLOW: At the beginning it was just sort of fun to dig up old sculptures or interesting to discover lost manuscripts in faraway monasteries and bring them down and read them. It took them a long time to realize that there was a whole other way of life being embodied there. So, there's this sense of excitement about the past. But it's also dangerous.

From across Europe ancient learning was carried back to Florence the city of Cosimo's birth

Florence in the year 1400 was a city unlike anywhere else in Europe. This major trading center in the heart of Tuscany was a republic in which powerful families vied with each other for political control.

DALE KENT: Florence was the place to be. As we all know, every age has a place. In the late 19th century it was Paris. In the late 20th century maybe it was New York. At the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries it was Florence.

In a side street of the main piazza, an ambitious family was trying to make its name. The Medici bank was a small-scale operation run from the back room of a wool shop. The growing business was managed by Cosimo's father, Giovanni de Medici.

Giovanni had risen from rural poverty through a combination of aggressive salesmanship and financial caution. He chose his clients very carefully. It wasn't just profits he valued. It was loyalty.
KENT: This is a society in which for your guarantees of protection, you look to a man, and he is your
patron and you are his client. And all the other people associated with him are your friends, so that you
can achieve almost anything with this network of friends of friends.

Baldessari Cosa was a former pirate who had embarked on an alternative career in the church. Now he
had ambitions to enter the Vatican, even to become Pope himself. All he needed was a campaign fund.

Giovanni knew that the church was in chaos. The papacy itself was up for grabs. With enough money
even Cosa stood a chance of success. Giovanni dared to back the unlikely outsider.

The Medici prepared a lavish loan. It was an enormous gamble for their local business. The family
supported Cosa all the way up the ladder of the church: from priest to cardinal. And then the bet with
the pirate finally paid off. In 1410 Baldessari Cosa was elected Pope John XXIII. And the first thing he
did was remember his friends, the Medici. The new pope needed a bank he could trust.

JERRY BROTTON: Giovanni and Cosimo completely controlled the papal account. They become known as
"Gods bankers," that's what the Medici become known as. And also of course, they get that account
over all the other big Florentine families. So they've made it; they've finally arrived.

---The Dome---

With their sudden leap in status, the Medici joined an elite group of powerful Florentines. But, like all
the leading families of the day, they would become transfixed by their city's humiliating failure. For over
a hundred years, a great unfinished Cathedral had loomed over Florence. The original planners had
been overly ambitious. They had meant to build the largest dome in the world--and they had failed.

FANTONI: The cathedral more than any other building of any nature in a medieval and renaissance city
represents the symbol of the identity of the community. And having the project not completed was a
sort of mutilation. And without a dome, you don't have a sacred building.

All contemporary building knowledge had been exhausted. Now the city looked for fresh ideas from a
new generation. Cosimo de Medici had grown up in the shadow the Cathedral. Now he and his father
stood on the threshold of city power.

Perhaps they could apply the enterprising spirit to the greatest
problem of the age and in the process win glory and power for the Medici family.

the search for a solution to the problem of the dome led men to study the achievements of the classical
past. Scholars like Cosimo knew it would take an unconventional mind to decipher the tantalizing clues.

Through the streets of Florence roamed just such a man, a self-taught genius obsessed by the
mysteries of the ancient world. His ideas were difficult to understand. His name was Filippo
Brunelleschi.
ROSS KING: *I think that the g-word of genius is something that people are reluctant to use these days, but I think it is very applicable in the case of Brunelleschi. However, maybe like many geniuses, he wasn’t someone you would necessarily want to know.*

Brunelleschi’s style was unorthodox, and it gained him few friends.

LAURO MARTINES: *He was in many arguments with the so-called city fathers. On one occasion he was actually carried out of the main government palace forcibly because he’d lost his temper and apparently he had insulted people, and they were not going to be Insulted, and they threw him out.*

But the family who had sponsored a pirate for a pope were not daunted by the temper of a maverick architect. In the Medici Brunelleschi found patrons willing to gamble on his judgment.

Brunelleschi’s vision would resurrect forgotten concepts of the past. And in 1419 a new orphanage in Florence became a showcase for his ideas and for Medici ambition.

KING: *Brunelleschi was using the classical orders of architecture, something that hadn’t been used in over a thousand years, and the people of Florence were so amazed by this that it was said they gathered on the building site, much to the inconvenience of the workmen, and actually watched this happening because they simply hadn’t seen anyone build in that style before.*

This was the first time true columns had been used for structural support since the days of ancient Rome. Out of Brunelleschi’s turbulent mind had come a vision of classical simplicity. He would spark an architectural revolution across Europe. Innovation and ambition went hand in hand, and for the Medici this was only the beginning.

BROTTON: *Brunelleschi was the house architect. They were very close. There was a clear fit between what Cosimo wanted and what Brunelleschi could give him, and it very much was about recreating a great classical city on the lines of Rome.*

SASLOW: *The Medici family did the sorts of things that every ruling family did. You try to get power by various public and private dealings and then you try to promote your image to the rest of the world through art and literature and having people write about you being a patron of things that can serve your ends.*

With the backing of the Medici, Brunelleschi now set his eye on the problem of the dome, the greatest challenge in Florence.

Brunelleschi set to work. Cosimo would publicly support him. The church authorities were desperate, offering a massive cash prize for a solution.

Brunelleschi’s model showed the largest unsupported dome in Christendom. But he was fearful his ideas would be stolen. He wrote his calculations in code and refused to explain the details of his plan. The Cathedral authorities demanded some kind of demonstration before they would award the prize, so Brunelleschi challenged them to stand an egg on its end. When they failed, Brunelleschi broke the bottom of the egg, and it stood up. The men complained that his solution was so obvious. Brunelleschi
protested, of course it was, and so would be the solution to the dome, if he showed them his plans. The authorities gave in to the stubborn architect.

The commission for the dome was his, but what Brunelleschi would now attempt was unprecedented and fraught with danger. He would have to rewrite the rules of Western architecture, and there was no certainty of success.

For inspiration Brunelleschi turned to the greatest civilization of the ancient world. And in Brunelleschi's wake came Cosimo, the papal banker, anxious to see things for himself. In ancient Rome, men had constructed architectural marvels. Buildings such as the Pantheon, the house of the gods, the largest freestanding dome in the world.

FANTONI: One of the most fascinating buildings in ancient Rome was definitely the Pantheon. It was one of the most fascinating buildings in the collective imagination of the Western world for a long time. It was really something to be absorbed and assimilated. In order to appropriate the techniques of the building but also the spirit that the dome was expressing.

Brunelleschi saw valuable clues in the Pantheon's design.

KING: He wanted to discover not only the proportions of it, but also the nuts and bolts of how it was built.

FANTONI: What particularly struck the contemporaries was the size of the dome and the fact that it was one of the very few complete domes that had survived from ancient times.

The architects of ancient Rome had framed the Pantheon with timber and poured their concrete dome over the top. But there was not enough timber in all of Tuscany to build a scaffold inside Florence cathedral. Brunelleschi's dome would have to support itself throughout the building process. Even the recipe for concrete had been lost since the fall of Rome, but through intense study the Pantheon gave up its secrets to Brunelleschi. He was inspired by its clever double skin, so Brunelleschi used the idea of the Pantheon's strong circle, placing an inner dome within the cathedral's octagonal drum.

Sandstone rings would hold the structure together like a barrel. It was an ingenious and completely original idea. In practice, however, Brunelleschi was entering uncharted territory.

When Cosmo returned to Florence, work on the dome had begun.

KING: You would have the sound of the hammers, you would have the workmen in the streets, beckoned by the bells that summoned them from their beds. It was a scene of chaotic activity, sort of like New York in the 1920s or something, when the first skyscrapers are going up.

KING: Brunelleschi came fresh to building sites with his own ideas. The workers ate their lunches up on the dome because he didn't want them descending in the middle of the day to go and have their lunch, because then they would be exhausted by the time they got back up the 350-400 odd steps. But he also served wine to them because that was really the drink that you had in Florence. Much safer than water, but he did make certain that your wine was diluted. You put a third part water in, which was the drink that was given to pregnant women at the time.
But as Brunelleschi's dome began to rise, the health of Cosimo's father began to fail. Giovanni de Medici knew the dangers that lurked in the streets of Florence. Although rich, he had taken pains to retain an aura of modesty. A man who rode on a mule did not invite attack. Giovanni offered his son a warning: "Be wary of going to the palace of government. Wait to be summoned. Do what you are asked to do and never display any pride. Always keep out of the public eye."

in 1429 Giovanni de Medici died. The city of Florence mourned a modest patron, but Cosimo de Medici had lost his guide and mentor.

Local custom dictated that Giovanni's corpse be passed through the walls of his home. The wall was then sealed behind him.

Giovanni was laid to rest in the Church of San Lorenzo, rebuilt by Brunelleschi along classical lines. It was now a magnificent temple to the Medici family.

--- The Showdown --

Giovanni's death cast a shadow over the future of the family. Now Cosimo had to assume his father's role. But how could he build on his father's legacy and still keep out of the public eye?

Cosimo's rivals, the Abizzi family, had governed Florence for generations. They were wary of any challenge to their power.

**KENT:** If the Medici and their followers have more authority, the Abizzi and their followers have less authority. Both parties can't win. One party has to go.

A battle between rival families would endanger not just the future of the Medici dynasty. It would threaten to drag Florence back into the world of the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile Brunelleschi also tried to escape the limitations of his age.

**KING:** Brunelleschi was not only an architect; he was an engineer. He had to solve enormous logistical problems. When he was building the dome, foremost among the problems was how to raise sandstone beams weighing 1,700 pounds 250 feet in the air. What he devised was unprecedented in the history of engineering. Oxen had great strength, great stamina, but you could not make them walk backwards for more than a few steps. So what Brunelleschi devised was a way of reversing a gear so he could raise a load several hundred feet in the air, change gear and then bring the hook back down, so that the oxen only ever walked counterclockwise or clockwise, whichever he wanted.

But there was still no guarantee that Brunelleschi's intricate design would stand up. The city of Florence was nervous, and no one more anxious than Cosimo. His patronage of Brunelleschi was well known. Nothing could please Cosimo's enemies more than to see Brunelleschi fail.
As Cosimo's wealth and power increased, so did the resentment of the ruling Albizzi family. They were losing their grip on the government of Florence. Sensing the danger, Cosimo transferred vast sums of money out of the city and made sure his family was safe.

**BROTTON:** *Florence is always constructed around large powerful families. They run the city. So for families like the Albizzi, for the Medici to suddenly get ahead in this way is absolutely devastating. And so this is a crucial moment where the infighting gets actually quite nasty.*

**MARTINES:** *In moments of keen political struggle--and Florence was there in the 1420s and 30s--there were no holds barred. You bribed, you killed, you intimidated in order to win friends and influence people.*

On the seventh of September 1433, Cosimo was summoned to the palace of government. The Albizzi were waiting for him. They had hatched a plot to wipe out the upstart Medici.

**COSIMO** (dramatized): "*When I arrived in the palace I found the majority of my companions already in the midst of a discussion. After some time I was commanded by the authority of the Signoria to go upstairs.*"

Cosimo was now in grave danger. Even the family's trusted consigliere had been tortured to uncover evidence against the Medici. Cosimo was at the mercy of his enemies.

**COSIMO:** "*I was taken by the captain of the guard to the cell known as the 'Baberia.'"

**KENT:** *He was imprisoned in the topmost room at the very top of the tower of the palace of government. He thought he would be flung to the ground. That was his first fear, that he would just be pushed out the window because they haven't got a lot in this period. And his entire family was terrified that they'd never see him again.*

But in a republic not even the Albizzi could dictate the fate of a citizen of Florence. They had to have the consent of the people. A referendum was called to decide Cosimo's future. The Albizzi hired soldiers to guard the piazza. Cosimo's friends were physically barred. Cosimo was accused of treason against the city and her people. A vote was taken. Cosimo was found guilty.

Now he faced execution, but Cosimo had friends even in the enemy camp. From his cell he engineered a secret negotiation for his life. Money talked, and Cosimo walked.

**KENT:** *Probably the reason why his life was spared was because, as he says in his own memoir of the event, that he paid his jailers a hefty bribe to let him out.*

**COSIMO:** "*They were not very bold. They could have had ten thousand or more for my safety.*"

Cosimo had survived, but he and his family were now banished, and Florence was in the hands of the Albizzi. No friend of Cosimo was safe. Brunelleschi himself was thrown into jail, and work on the dome was abandoned.
But life in Florence without Cosimo wouldn't be easy. The Medici bank had funded most of the city's commercial activity. Florentine business soon ground to a halt.

Cosimo's supporters begged him to return and retake the city by force, but Cosimo remembered his father's advice: "Wait to be summoned." Cosimo waited.

He knew that without money the people of Florence would soon tire of the Albizzi. He was right. Within a year the Albizzi had lost control of the city and turned on the people themselves. They attacked the palace of government but were held off by the captain of the City Guard, a loyal friend of the Medici.

But Cosmo had even more powerful friends. Agents of the Pope descended on Florence. This time the Albizzi had gone too far. Cosimo's exile was now over.

COSIMO: "At sunset, they bid us come. And we set forth with a great following. The people crowded the piazza, and in the palace were many armed men for security."

When Cosimo was offered control of the city of Florence, he modestly accepted.

Revenge on the Albizzi was selective but severe. Cosimo preferred plain and simple gestures. A loss of good face was a badge of public humiliation, a public threat to all challenges.

--- Triumph? ---

The Medici were back in business. A friend described Cosimo's new power: "Political questions are settled at his house. The man he chooses holds office. It is he who decides peace and war, and controls the laws. He is king in everything but name."

Money began to flood back into Florence. Brunelleschi led his workers back to the dome, and the Medici bank continued to grow.

KENT: It was basically under Cosmo that the bank expands from this really powerful, solid base, but where the money was, was diversifying internationally in having branches from Barcelona to Bruges to Cairo.

On behalf of the church the Medici bank collected money from every parish in Europe. No one was exempt, and Cosimo's agents threatened excommunication from the Church to those who were slow to pay up. The Pope himself opened a huge credit line with the Medici, enough to buy ten palaces. The Medici bank was now the most profitable business in Europe. But wealth had never been enough for Cosimo. He began to commission the finest craftsmen of his age.

FANTONI: Cosimo developed a strategy in spending money in such a way that wealth would be transformed into prestige and power.

Cosimo de Medici became the most sought-after patron in Florence.
FANTONI: Cosimo spent six hundred thousand golden florins in patronage, which is six times the total state entry for one year. Patronage is great for the production of art but totally irrational from an economic point of view. Patronage is a political strategy. This in my opinion is one of the keys to understand the Renaissance. This high political competition expressed through patronage in a city with those art potentialities gave birth to an art market that has no equivalent elsewhere in Italy at the time.

SASLOW: Why the artist needs the patron is very simple. There are no public art markets in the Renaissance as we have today. You didn't make art and then put it in the shop window and wait for someone to buy it. You only made art when somebody commissioned it from you and paid you for it, more or less in advance.

But sometimes, as Cosimo discovered, payment alone didn't guarantee results. He had particular problems with the wayward monk and artist Filippo Lippi.

SASLOW: Lippi was put into the monastery because he was an orphan, not because he asked to go into the monastery and he really wasn't suited for that kind of life. He was always breaking out and chasing after women and this sort of thing. One of the things that Cosimo understood is that you get better work out of people when people are happy. So rather than yelling at them and being imperious and demanding and holding them to the letter of every little contract, you might get better work and more reliable work if you treated them like human beings who have other needs and have another life. Cosimo doesn't care if you show up for work and you do what we've commissioned you to do you. Do anything you want at another time.

Cosimo tolerated his temperamental artists because of their talent and their talents when they are widely recognized.

FANTONI: You have to be difficult as an artist in these times because you are under a lot of pressure. 70% of the Renaissance artists are active in Florence at the time. Though there were a lot of patrons, though there is a lot of money available, not all of the projects would grant the same kind of dignity and visibility to the artist who has to self-promote himself and who has to achieve certain standards of credibility and fame in order to be able to be put in charge of the best projects.

The man working on the best project in Florence was Filippo Brunelleschi, and he continued to break boundaries of conventional understanding. He simply saw the world as no other man had. In 1434 Brunelleschi unveiled a new technique that radically changed Western art. He invented perspective.

SASLOW: Brunelleschi developed linear perspective which allowed pictures to create the convincing illusion of a three-dimensional space. Where Gothic art is primarily flat, to represent objects as three-dimensional, rounded solid forms, imitating the appearance of the natural world.

BROTTON: Perspective revolutionizes everything. It revolutionizes art, but then of course it revolutionizes how we see completely. It creates a modern way of looking, but it begins in the 15th century, and it very much begins under Cosimo with Brunelleschi.

Cosimo had broadened his circle of radical friends. Amongst his favorites was a notorious sculptor, Donatello.
SASLOW: Cosimo had a kind of fondness for Donatello. They really were very close friends he used him for a lot of projects, but it was closer than that. It was really a kind of personal loyalty.

But Donatello's talent came at a price: his violent temper. He was known to smash his own creations rather than to sell to an unappreciative client.

SASLOW: There were incidents where Donatello would be snubbed by other people, or snide remarks would be made, and Cosimo went out of his way to show that he was still friends with Donatello and that he didn’t care about these sorts of minor personal matters. That this was basically an honest, upright, talented individual who deserved to be treated with the utmost respect.

Cosimo was one of the few friends Donatello trusted, and Cosimo had commissioned a truly radical work of art.

SASLOW: Donatello's David was one of the most revolutionary works hard in the 15th century because it was the first time since the ancient Romans that anyone had tried to make a free-standing bronze sculpture of a nude man. The helmet that's on the ground that David is standing on with Goliath's head in it as a symbol of victory, has a long feather attached to the helmet that goes all the way up the thigh of the David, and you can read that as a kind of erotic caress.

Such a sensual art was frowned upon by many in Florence.

FANTONI: Donatello's David is on the edge because Florence more than any other city of the Renaissance was associated to sodomia, sodomy and homosexuality, and there have been 14,000 people tried by the Florentine tribunal in the 15th century for having committed the crime of sodomy. So he was really playing with something very dangerous, but he was willing to take more risk than some of his contemporaries.

BROTTON: Cosimo gives a space to artists and writers to develop new ideas that are outside the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church. Art is really where it's happening. Art and sculpture and architecture are pushing forward the boundaries of what it's possible to actually do.

No one in Florence was taking more risks than Brunelleschi. His magnificent dome was rising even higher, but with each new brick the angle of the dome increased. This was the critical phase of Brunelleschi's design.

KING: One of the major problems Brunelleschi faced when he was building the dome, and particularly when he got to the upper reaches of it, was how he could prevent the bricks from falling inward. What Brunelleschi did was to insert bands of vertical brickwork to tie the horizontal courses to these vertical ones which were keyed to courses five, six rows beneath that where the mortar is drying.

Brunelleschi's herringbone design was untried and untested. The slightest miscalculation could result in catastrophic failure.

FANTONI: It would have been a disaster, but I would say not as much a disaster in terms of not completing an architectural project, but a disaster in failing in producing the most grandiose symbol of Florentine pride ever.
From his patrons to his workers, all looked on in disbelief. Brunelleschi had to prove that he was right.

**KING:** Brunelleschi was a very hands-on person. Not only did he inspect many of the bricks that were used and sent consignments back if they weren't quite up to snuff, he also actually laid some of the bricks himself. The workers weren't certain at all that this was a viable proposition to lay these on an inward curving vault, and so he himself went up and practiced what he preached.

The genius of Brunelleschi had defied all doubt and danger.

**KENT:** And in 1436, Brunelleschi, who has been keeping the faith all this time that he could build that dome without aid of scaffolding or any other visible support, has brought, as he writes in a little poem he wrote, "this miracle to pass."

This great achievement had mirrored the rise of the city's most powerful family, and now it towered majestically over the city of Florence, the greatest architectural feat in the Western world.

Cosimo basked in the dome's reflected glory, inviting the Pope himself to conduct the consecration. If Cosimo could have looked into the future, he would have seen the story of the Renaissance unfold on the ceiling of the dome itself. Weighing 37,000 tons and using more than four million bricks, Brunelleschi's dome was proof that man could conquer the seemingly impossible.

A friend of Cosimo's wrote of its impact: "It touches the skies and casts its shadow on the whole of Tuscany."

Cosimo was quick to capitalize on the triumph. He planned a dazzling international spectacle, the Council of Florence. It would be a global showcase for the magnificent new dome and the celebration of Florentine art and culture which had blossomed under Cosimo de Medici. The council brought together the greatest mix of thinkers, artists, merchants, and churchmen that the world had ever seen.

News quickly spread of the birth of a new Rome on the banks of the river Arno. In the streets and in the piazzas, the cultures of east and west were brought together, and bankrolling it all was Cosimo de Medici.

**KENT:** The most interesting thing he does is pay all the travel expenses of all people from exotic places like India and Ethiopia. Messengers are sent out to call people from these far distant lands which are literally mythic to the Florentines. They're the stuff of legend.

Cosimo's guests gazed in wonder at an explosion of art and culture in the shadow of Brunelleschi's dome.

**BROTTON:** Cosimo was thrilled. He set up public lectures on Plato. It was just the best thing possible, and of course it also gave him this great political cachet. It was the culmination of everything he'd ever wanted.

**KENT:** Cosimo is now the great intercessor for the Florentine people. He truly is their patron, their godfather in every sense.
Cosimo had overseen the triumph of his city, but at heart the godfather of Florence remained a cautious man.

**COSIMO**: "I know the humors of my city. Before fifty years have passed, we shall be expelled, but my buildings will remain."

In his final years he baptized and then buried both a son and a grandson. On Cosimo's death in 1464, the city of Florence declared him *Pater Patriae*, father of the fatherland. But who was left to lead the Medici? Who would fill the shoes of the Godfather of the Renaissance?