



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

**WHAT A
WOMAN
CAN DO**

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MENTORIS
PROJECT

Prologue

THE HAGUE, UNITED PROVINCES OF THE NETHERLANDS
FEBRUARY 1642

I am trapped in the Netherlands. Well, not entirely trapped, but I had to flee London with Queen Henrietta's retinue and I appear unable to book passage on a ship out of here. The queen doesn't want me to leave her. She looks upon me as a kind of pet, much like the three dwarves and the monkey that travel with her. I don't like being lumped in with the dwarves and monkey—even though one of the dwarves is a very good painter of miniatures.

The Hague is a lovely city, or it would be if the sun ever came out. Although, after nearly four years in London, I suppose I should be used to gray skies and cold drizzle. I yearn for the blue skies and warm weather of Naples even more than I dream of a decent meal. English food ought not to be tolerated by anyone raised in Rome. They boil everything until it is gray and no longer resembles its original state. Most people in England, even the royal palaces, have never seen a fork, nor do they clean their knives between meals. I swear, if I have to eat one more

bowl of boiled mutton or stewed sailfish, I shall howl in protest. The English also drink tankards of ale, a thin, bitter brew I never get used to. When they do drink wine they sweeten it with honey and whatever else they have on hand. Give me a cup of unaltered red wine, rich with the taste of grapes and soil and sun, and maybe a bit of aged cheese and some fruit and I'm a happy woman.

Forgive me. I complain about the weather and food to distract myself. I am most dreadfully homesick, you see. I came to England to help my papà finish a series of paintings for a ceiling in the queen's new house, but before I finished the paintings, Papà died. First, I stayed to finish the work, though I insisted only Papà get painter's credit for it. Later, I stayed because the political situation in England went to hell in a handbasket. King Charles and his queen kept me in England against my will. I don't think Charles even likes my paintings. It the king's politics that have trapped me—politics of the worst kind—religious politics.

I blame King Henry VIII almost as much as King Charles. Henry died a good fifty years before I was born, but my English captivity is still his fault. Long ago, he conceived an unseemly passion for Anne Boleyn and the only way he could marry her was to get his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled and the Pope wouldn't agree to that. So Henry took England out of the Catholic Church and made himself the head of the new Protestant Church of England. Once rid of papal authority, Henry put away his queen, married his mistress Anne Boleyn,

and as a bonus, dissolved all the Catholic convents and monasteries. Of course, he kept their riches for himself. What a rat!

But what does that have to do with me, Artemisia Gentileschi, an Italian lady painter? More than you'd think. When Queen Elizabeth died without heirs, her cousin who was already King of Scotland became King of England as well. James' parents raised him Catholic but he had the sense to pretend he'd converted to Protestantism. Or maybe he didn't care one way or another, as long as he ended up king. This is the same man who had babies with his Protestant queen, even though everyone knew he loved the Duke of Buckingham. James was the English monarch for even longer than Elizabeth and by the time he died, England had been Protestant for over a century. His son Charles, as in King Charles, won't play his father's game. First, he tried and failed to marry a Spanish princess, then he successfully married Henrietta, a French princess, and both of those countries are as Catholic as Rome. Worse, Queen Henrietta never pretended to be anything but Catholic. Which is why she is so fond of Catholic painters like Papà and me and also why her subjects hate her.

England has stood on the precipice of revolution for years, with the king and parliament bickering about who has ultimate power and which religion is best. The problem came to a head when the Dowager Queen of France, Marie de Medici, visited her daughter Henrietta and tried to remove her from England. The plan was to flee and take all the Catholic courtiers (and painters) with them. Charles put a stop to it, knowing that if his queen left England, it would be the end of his rule.

I complicated my English purgatory by refusing to paint

anything for either monarch. Though Queen Henrietta took possession of my *Self-Portrait* and a *Lucretia*, she never paid for either, nor has Charles paid me for the work Papà and I did at the queen's Greenwich house. I needed that money quite badly and thought I could force the monarchs to pay by refusing to paint anything new.

The queen never did pay me, but she did take me to the Netherlands and The Hague when she at last fled England, leaving her husband, Charles, behind. Supposedly, she's looking for support and funding to make war on those Englishmen who disapprove of their essentially Catholic monarchy. I'm not sure I care. Kings and queens are not like other people, and people who stand near them too often get hurt.

In the meantime, it may be months before I find a ship willing to take me home. My best chance is to hop-skip my way home from the Netherlands to Portugal or Spain, then to Naples. Luckily, Naples is an important port in the Mediterranean and I'm likely to find passage home once I get out of the North Sea. It's bound to take months, but I vow I will get there eventually, and when I do, I shall leave Naples no more.

Because I have neither painting supplies nor the heart to paint, I have decided to write my life story. Now, more than ever, I am grateful my friend Signor Galileo proved such a stern taskmaster. He taught me my letters, you see, then he taught me to write. And though he was always kind, he expected perfection from the start. At the time I wanted to strangle the old man after every lesson, but if I could go back I would kiss his cheek a

hundred times. Last week, news of his death reached The Hague and I knew not if I should rejoice at dear Galileo's release from his travails or weep for the pity of it all.

But enough of that. I must tell this story in seemly order. I can begin writing while I wait for a ship and continue on the trip home. And should that not prove enough time, I shall write when I am between paintings. I do so not because I am important, but because I am unusual. I am a woman painter. Not one of those lady dilettantes who paints pictures of fruit baskets and bundles of flowers—not at all. I knew Caravaggio long ago and am considered among great Caravaggisti. I have sold paintings to popes and cardinals, dukes and duchesses, and even kings and queens (when they would pay). And I have done so while the world told me women couldn't be serious artists. Bah. Of course we can. We have to work twice as hard for half as much money, but we can be great. I have known a few great female painters and I find one in my mirror every morning. To all the men and women who told me I could not paint, I always said the same thing, though more often with my brush than my mouth, and I say it to you now: "I will show you what a woman can do."

Chapter One

ROME, THE PAPAL STATES

1609

“**W**hat do you think, Papà?” I could hear the anxiety in my voice, but I couldn’t help it. So much depended on Papà’s judgment. He stood in front of my first unsupervised painting, one I’d planned, sketched, and painted entirely on my own. I’d painted in my bedroom, rather than in Papà’s workroom, so he wouldn’t see it and advise on its progress.

Papà stepped back, stroked his beard, and tipped his head to the right like he was thinking hard. After a long moment, his lips curved into a faint smile. “You are a far better painter than I was at sixteen, Artemisia,” he said.

I bounced on my toes, then caught myself and clasped my hands together. A grown woman did not bounce at praise. “I was afraid it might be too . . . common,” I said. I thought my first *Madonna and Child*, which I painted with Papà’s supervision, idealized and romanticized the mother-child bond. But Papà wanted it that way, so that’s how I painted it. Every time I saw it, I heard the argument I’d had with Papà in my head.

New mothers never look like the Virgin Mary does in church paintings, all holy and serene; instead, they look exhausted and disheveled. But if you observe a mother, you'll see that look that says she'd die before she let anyone hurt her baby. That's what I tried to capture with my second *Madonna and Child*: the paradoxical mix of worn-out befuddlement and helpless adoration. Still, my choice to use our servant Tuzia as the model worried me a bit. Madonnas should be young and beautiful, and Tuzia had five living children and wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She'd been a maid and housekeeper her whole life, so she wasn't the sort of woman who had her portrait painted. That was for rich ladies.

Papà shook his head at my concern. "The world is full of mothers no longer in the prime of their beauty," he said. "Our friend Caravaggio would approve of your realism. This looks just like a scene in any plain Roman house." Papà stepped right up to the canvas, so close his nose almost touched it. "I like the way she appears half asleep and ruffled from bed. I've seen your mamma look that way many a night, God bless her soul."

I stepped over and patted him on the arm. Mamma had died four years earlier, but we hadn't gotten used to her absence, though my little brothers didn't remember her as well as Papà and I did. I'd been twelve years old and nearly a woman when Mamma died, but poor Francesco had been only seven and Giulio had just turned five. Everyone in the Piazza di Spagna thought Papà should take another wife to raise his children and keep his house, but Papà said a wife would mean more heartache. One dead wife was enough for him. Papà is tender like that.

He took my hand and gave it a little squeeze. “It reminds me of how your mother looked when you children were young. We were happy then,” he said. He turned his gaze back to my Madonna. “You have a marvelous way with hands—I should take lessons from you. And your drapery is every bit as good as mine.”

“I had a good teacher,” I said. Everyone said Orazio Gentileschi had a gorgeous way with fabric. Papà could make the folds look so real, you’d think you could reach out and feel the softness.

Papà laughed. “I have always had trouble with hands and feet, so you didn’t learn that from me. My lady hands always look like silk gloves filled with sand.”

“The trick is to paint dimples on the backs of the hands,” I said. “It suggests knuckles, which in turn suggests bones. And you told me to think of the bones when painting faces. I do the same for hands.”

Papà peered at the Madonna’s hands, then stretched out his own before him. I touched the dimple on the back of Papà’s wrinkled hand, then pointed at the Madonna’s hand. “See?”

“I do, you clever girl. Run up to my studio and fetch the Madonna you painted last winter. I want to see them side by side.”

I found my other painting sitting against the interior wall and snatched it up without really looking at it. I’d stared at it enough when planning the new painting, deciding which elements to keep, throw out, and improve. Papà was still staring at the new painting when I returned. I leaned the older painting

against the base of the tripod that held the second Madonna so the two lined up, one above the other.

“Ah, yes, Artemisia,” Papà murmured. “Many people would prefer the first painting, but they would be wrong.”

I sighed in happiness. I thought so too, but hadn’t been so sure Papà would. The first painting was sweet and easy to look at, though the baby resembled a tiny adult—you see that in paintings a lot and it’s stupid. Babies didn’t look like miniature adults in real life.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Papà said, “Your baby toes are magnificent. And the scale of your mother’s legs and feet—my girl has been studying her Michelangelo.”

I nodded, thrilled he’d noticed. “It was Michelangelo’s *Cumaeen Sibyl* in the Sistine Chapel that made me realize I’d avoided the mother’s legs and feet in this painting.” I pointed at my first Madonna and said, “That, and the *Madonna and Child* sculpture at the Church of Saint Agostino. You remember, the one we visited on Ash Wednesday. That Madonna’s body had gravitas like she connected to the ground in some earthy, rooted way.”

Papà nodded. “I am glad you pay attention to our lessons, unlike your brothers, I must say. You perfected your draped fabric painting in this first Madonna, and that’s a skill you’ll need. But here,” he said, pointing again, “you demonstrate *perfect* anatomy. And do not for a moment think I’ve failed to notice your homage to the *Madonna and Child* I painted last year for Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Tuzia didn’t mind?”

Like Papà’s painting, I had painted my Madonna offering

her breast to the child. So the painting wasn't about just maternal love, I had posed the child reaching for its mother's hair and looking up at her face, ignoring the proffered nipple. The child's gaze made the connection between the two figures more intimate, emphasizing a connection between mother and child that has little to do with milk.

Papà turned away from the paintings and sat on the edge of my bed. He patted the spot next to him on the mattress. "Come sit with me, my dear."

I sat, hearing the rustle of straw stuffing as I drew up one leg and turned toward Papà. He'd liked my new painting, but that didn't keep me from worrying. Before he could speak, I blurted, "I can do it, Papà. I know I can."

He sighed and stared at the wall opposite the bed. "It's a hard thing, this life as a painter, and it will be much harder for you than it's ever been for me." He shook his head. "If only you'd been born a boy."

I was ready for this argument. "Signora Fontana does well for herself. Why, just last month, Accademia di San Luca admitted her to its guild. And two popes have shown her favor—not just Pope Clement, but Pope Paul as well."

Papà sighed. "That is true, my dear, but we both know Lavinia Fontana is a high-born lady whose family is connected to the old Pope Julius, may God rest his soul. You are the daughter of a painter whose own father was a goldsmith. Smithing is a necessary and honorable profession, but your grandfather was a tradesman and people do not forget that. I wished we lived in a world in which social hierarchy does not matter, but we do not."

Papà wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right either. I pushed myself off the bed and stood before him. "Signora Fontana's family has money only because she earns it. Everyone knows her family is well-born but poor, and her husband is not a gentleman. He takes care of the household and grinds her pigments," I said. "She earns her family's living by painting, though it is true she's a portraitist."

Papà wagged a finger at me. "Have a care, Artemisia. Many a hardworking painter has made a living from portraits. There's no need to pour scorn on artists with less ability than Signora Fontana."

I frowned at Papà, refusing to be sorry for speaking the truth. "I just get so angry. Why should I not paint? Because I am not a man? You said yourself I paint the best hands in Rome. Lavinia Fontana has proved a woman can paint important paintings, even nudes. And there is also Sofonisba Anguissola."

"Another noblewoman and portrait painter."

"Yes, but the great Michelangelo recognized her talent, didn't he?"

"So you seek to emulate Sofonisba?" Papà smiled and waved his hand at my two Madonnas.

I put my hands on my hips in exasperation. "Well, no, Papà. You know as well as I do that she was the Spanish queen's pet painter."

"True," he said with a grin. "But there was that scandal, the one with the ship's captain."

I laughed. After contracting one respectable marriage to a Spanish nobleman, Sofonisba married a ship's captain. The

news had been a seven-day wonder, even in Rome: the great Sofonisba had married a commoner. But the captain had turned out to be his wife's greatest advocate and promoted her paintings wherever he traveled.

"I have little hope of marriage to a wealthy, high-born man, nor to a devoted commoner. But I can make my living as a painter, I am sure of it," I said.

"As Signora Fontana does?"

"Yes, Papà. I admire her style of living, though I don't like the way she idealizes figures. You left Mannerism behind for Signor Caravaggio's naturalism, and you were right. It is a better sort of art." Because I couldn't help myself, I added, "And, like Sofonisba, she's wasting her talent painting portraits."

Now it was Papà's turn to laugh. "I already told you, there's no shame in honest work." He rubbed at his head until his thin gray hair stood on end. "I must concede that you have met every challenge I set for you. You learned to grind pigments and mix paint when you were no taller than a donkey's back, and you learned to sketch when you could barely hold a piece of charcoal. In fact, your current command of anatomical drawing has exceeded mine."

"And you never needed to beat me," I said with a wink. When I first learned to draw, he'd set me to some task and tell me that if I failed, he'd beat me with a stout stick. The threat always made me laugh. Unlike most fathers in the neighborhood, Papà never hit any of his children, not even Giulio, whose antics would have tried Saint Monica.

Papà kissed my cheek. "No, I did not. Perhaps I should have.

I would be a poor papà indeed if I didn't admit that despite being a woman, you have a great talent. And you're likely the only painting child I'll have—your brothers are worse than useless at anything but making trouble.”

My heart soared at his words. There have been times when I thought he'd never give up on Francesco and Giulio. Most papàs expected their sons to carry on the family business while daughters married and went away, and mine was no different. Or he had been no different until my brothers proved they would never be real painters.

Papà took my hand to pull me back to sit next to him. “Here is what I propose,” he said. “Signor Esposito has seen and admired my *Lute Player* and wants one of his own. But I have won a position with my friend Agostino Tassi, painting frescoes at the Quirinal Palace.”

“Oh, Papà, that's wonderful. When did that happen?” I clapped in appreciation of my father's astounding coup. The Quirinal Palace was one of the great new buildings in Rome.

“I heard only yesterday. Pope Paul set aside money to finish the palace's decorations. He has commissioned a group of us to paint various scenes in the Sala Regia. The pope wants Greek Muses and lots of scenery.”

“Really? The pope would allow non-religious themes? I thought the Council of Trent forbade superstitions in paintings.”

Papà shrugged. “Pope Paul is a Borghese and they are an art-loving family. I've heard he finds the religious art of the last fifty years quite dreary. But you've gotten me off the topic, you wretched girl. My point is that I do not have time to plan and

produce a copy of my lute girl, but the money is too good to leave on the table. I propose you paint it and we sell it as mine.”

“Papà!” I gasped. Painters passed off their assistant’s paintings as their own all the time and no one thought much of it, but Papà had never done it.

“We’ll get a much greater sum for your painting if Signor Esposito believes I painted it. Then I shall give you half the commission. With that money, you must paint a large-scale, multi-figure painting as a sample of your talent. It should announce to the world that you are available for commissions.”

I threw my arms around his neck and thanked the Holy Father for giving me the best papà in the world. “What shall I paint?” I asked.

He kissed my forehead and stood to go. “That is for you to decide. It will be *your* statement to the art buyers of the world, not mine.”

When Papà had gone, I walked to my bedroom window and pushed back the shutters. Below me, the piazza bustled with activity. Women washed clothes at the fountain, a baker’s boy wheeled a cart piled high with golden loaves, and gentlemen strolled about, notable for the swords they carried at their hips. I watched, marveling that no one knew that up in this window stood a girl whose life had changed. *I am no longer an apprentice*, I thought. *I am a painter*.

“Now tuck it away where a cutpurse can’t get at it,” Papà told me. He shook the small leather pouch so the coins inside jingled

like bells. “It’s quite a tidy sum of money for a young woman just past her seventeenth birthday.”

We stood on the street in front of our house, waiting for a hired carriage. For the occasion I wore my best gown, made of green linen with a square-cut bodice and a split skirt, showing an embroidered underskirt. I am burdened with unruly hair, thick and curly and brown, but I had braided a green velvet ribbon into it and pinned it around my head in a crown. Francesco had whistled at me when I came downstairs, and because neither of my brothers is free with compliments, I took it to mean I looked my best.

Dear Papà had arranged the day as a reward for the work I’d done on the two copies I’d painted. He’d meant me to copy *Lute Player*, but then Signor Esposito decided he also wanted a copy of Papà’s *Judith and Her Maidservant*. At first, I’d been annoyed at the delay, especially because my *Lute* painting hadn’t been an exact copy of Papà’s. But Signor Esposito had liked my variation (though he thought it was Papà’s, not mine) and wanted more. This turned out fine because Judith paintings are a wonderful way to portray women *not* being saintly. If you’ve ever seen a Judith painting, you know why—they’re wonderfully violent, especially the ones where she’s beheading Holofernes. Papà’s version showed the moment just after Judith cut off the Assyrian general’s head. In it, Judith and her maidservant held Holofernes’s decapitated head between them, Judith still clutching the sword she’d used for cutting. I painted it pretty much that way, except my Judith didn’t look a bit afraid.

“I am always careful, Papà,” I said. I tucked the little pouch down inside my bodice, where no one would get it. It felt good to know I could go into any apothecary that specialized in colors and buy whatever I needed for making paint. Papà had a magnificent book on how to make dyes and paints, but I’d never learned to read. By the time Papà discovered I was going to be a painter and not a housekeeper, it was too late to learn. Papà taught me the formulas for nearly fifty colors, from the galls that make grays to the orpiment that makes yellow and gold, and all the colors in between.

I’d need to buy a large frame, canvas for stretching, and a pot of white lead glaze. But first I must decide what to paint. The Judith had been fun, but I didn’t want anyone to confuse my work with Papà’s or Caravaggio’s, and both had painted famous Judiths. So, something else. But what, and just how big? It needed to be large enough to make an impression, but not so massive that it was impossible to move around. At least I could afford whatever I chose.

“The carriage will take you first to Signora Fontana’s studio,” Papà said. “The good lady has consented to give you some time. The pope has just appointed her as the official portraitist of the court, and as a consequence she is very busy, so do not linger. After that, you’ll visit Saint Peter’s Basilica and the Sistine Chapel to examine the paintings there. I’m aware you’ve seen them several times, but I want you to look again with an eye to our sample painting. Oh, and I’ve arranged a surprise for you at Saint Peter’s.”

I knew better than to question Papà about the surprise. He loved arranging treats for his children, and no matter what I said, he'd keep his secret.

The hired carriage came around the corner and stopped at the house. As I climbed in, I spared a glance at the horses before turning back to Papà. "And then I'll finish the day at the Quirinal, where you're working?" I asked.

Papà nodded. "I'd like you to see the work and meet my friend Signor Tassi. Go, now. I'll see you in a few hours."

No more than fifteen minutes later, the carriage came to a narrow, three-story house. I felt a little disappointed at the sight of it. Such a famous lady painter should live in a grander building. When I knocked, I was admitted by a man who introduced himself as Lavinia Fontana's husband, Gian Zappi. "She'll be right down," he said as he showed me to a small sitting room. "She likes to work in the morning when the light is best, but I will tell her you are here."

The room had shelves on two of the four walls, each filled with interesting artifacts and books. A third wall held a small spinet, its keyboard open as if someone had played it only moments ago. I tried not to feel intimidated, but we Gentileschis certainly couldn't afford books and instruments.

After a few minutes, a small, dark-haired woman bustled into the room. "You must be Orazio's daughter," she said with a gentle smile. "He says you have the gift, and so I think we shall be friends."

I leaped to my feet and introduced myself, feeling quite

stupid as soon as the words came out of my mouth. Of course Signora Fontana knew who I was. She just said so.

“You may call me Lavinia,” the lady said. “We are sister painters, are we not?” Lavinia motioned me back to my chair and sat nearby. We talked of inconsequential things for several minutes before she brought up the topic of my painting. “Your father tells me you are planning your first great work and could use some advice about the subject. Is that true, or have you already decided what you’re going to do and you’re being polite?”

I shrugged, feeling embarrassed again. “I know and I don’t know. I like to paint women but I don’t like most of the paintings of women I’ve seen.” Realizing my error, I added, “Not yours, of course, but . . .”

Lavinia sat back in her chair. Her eyes crinkled in thought. “I understand,” she said. “Most painters paint women as objects—things men look at. They see us and don’t see us.” She rose and beckoned me to follow. We walked down a short hall and turned into a man’s study. “Zappi’s room,” Lavinia explained. She gestured at a painting on the far wall. “I keep this painting in here to remind myself what I’m up against.” A nude woman looked straight at the viewer, inviting them to gaze at her naked body, while also seeming aware of the two leering old men outside her window. Near her foot, a fountain gushed water, while a tubular strip of cloth lay between her legs.

I knew it immediately. Cavaliere D’Arpino’s *Susanna and the Elders* was a much-reproduced painting and d’Arpino visited Papa’s studio on occasion. “I know d’Arpino,” I told Lavinia. “It’s scandalous, isn’t it? The painting, I mean.”

“It’s no better than erotica,” she said, her mouth twisting with scorn. “You know the story, do you not?”

“Two older men spied on Susanna, a virtuous and beautiful wife, while she bathed,” I told her. “When she refused their advances, they denounced her as an adulterer. The very men who accused her found her guilty and sentenced her to death. Then, at the last minute, Daniel questioned the elders and proved they were lying. So the judge found the elders guilty of bearing false witness.”

“And executed *them*, not Susanna,” Lavinia said. “Yet you’ll see countless paintings of this parable as only an opportunity to display a naked female body. Men want this art in their homes, but it is little more than pornography. It matters not that no woman wants old men to watch her bathe.” Lavinia dismissed the painting with a wave and left the room. I followed, considering her point.

When we took our seats again, I said, “You are right, but the problem isn’t just naughty pictures.” I described the Judith painting I’d copied for Papà. “It was very good, but he used me as his model for Judith and made me-Judith look nervous about cutting off Holofernes’s head. And afraid in general.”

“And how should Judith look?” Lavinia asked, leaning forward a little.

“Any woman brave enough to sneak into an enemy general’s tent to slice off his head with a sword wouldn’t be timid. She’d be wary but excited, and very, very dangerous.”

Lavinia grinned. “She’d be jubilant too, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you, if you’d killed a man you hated? I haven’t seen

your father's Judith, but I've seen Signor Caravaggio's and I thought he got it all wrong. Not that anyone agrees with me. That painting took Rome by storm."

She was right. Caravaggio painted Judith leaning away from the knife, as if she was trying to distance herself from the violence inherent in slitting a man's throat. "Men want to believe women are meek," I said. They don't want to show a woman being strong. Maybe they think it will give us unseemly ideas."

Lavinia was still laughing at this when a servant interrupted with a tray of fruit juice and small cakes. After we'd served ourselves, Lavinia returned to our discussion. "Are you thinking of trying a new kind of Judith?" she asked.

"Oh, heavens no." I nearly spit out my lemon cake at the idea. "I don't think I should challenge those paintings when I have no reputation of my own."

"I agree," Lavinia said. "There's too much history. Of course, you must do a Judith at some point in your career, but not yet. I'd almost like to try one myself, but my appointment to the Papal Court has me painting cardinals and their mistresses. No, you need some known subject upon which you can work your point of view, but not one recently painted by anyone of note."

"Must it be religious?" I asked. I wished I didn't already know the answer to this question. "It would be great fun to make one of the Greek goddesses do something heroic or scandalous. Diana hunting bad men with a pack of vicious dogs or something like that."

"No Greeks or Romans. You know better." Lavinia frowned at me. "And remember, there's religious and then there's biblical,

if you take my meaning, I'd advise against any sad-faced saints or perfect Madonnas, but the Bible is full of stories of strong women. You could take your pick."

Just then, Signor Zappi came in and kissed his wife's cheek. "Darling, Casoni is here to take your silhouette. I've taken him up to your studio," he said.

"Tell him I'll be right there," Lavinia said. She tipped her head so her husband could kiss her on the lips, then watched him as he left the room. "The pope desires a medallion struck in my image and Casoni is here to start the work. It's a bit embarrassing."

I thought it sounded grand and entirely thrilling. Maybe one day a pope would want my image on a medallion. Wouldn't that be something?

We stood to make our goodbyes, and Lavinia clasped me in a light hug. "You will have to work twice as hard and for half as much money, but you'll do fine if you stay true to your art. And before I go, here is my best piece of advice."

"What?" I blurted like some great fool.

Lavinia chuckled. "Marry a good man who is also a bad painter. He'll be only too glad to give up his career and manage the household so you can paint. And because he once himself painted, he'll understand your work and take care of you as well as my Zappi does. I've had eleven children; did you know that?" Her expression turned downcast. "All but three have passed on to heaven, but I still have my dear Zappi."

"Marry a nice man," I repeated. If only I'd known how difficult it would be to follow that simple advice.



I watched out the window as the hired carriage next took me to Saint Peter's. I could have walked the distance, but respectable women did not walk about Rome alone. The city was safe enough, but rules like that are often about something else, aren't they?

I saw the grand dome of Saint Peter's towering above the rest of the buildings around the Vatican. Like any Roman, I knew Emperor Constantine the Great had ordered the original Saint Peter's built. That first Saint Peter's formed the basis for Vatican City, built on the former site of Nero's Circus. The insane Emperor Nero had crucified the Apostle Peter right where the basilica stood today.

A hundred years ago, Pope Julius had the old church torn down and began a new one. Everyone said Saint Peter's was the greatest building in Christendom, and I believed it. I'd visited Saint Peter's several times with Papà, but each time I saw the great basilica I felt a kind of awe—it was like no other building in Rome, and that was saying something. Rome had a multitude of great churches.

The carriage driver stopped just inside the Vatican walls, at the front of the piazza that spread before Saint Peter's. I was wondering if it would be decent to cross that great, sacred space alone when I heard someone call my name. The carriage door swung open to reveal Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger. "Uncle Michaelo!" I squealed.

He hugged me so tightly, he squeezed the breath out of me. Uncle Michaelo isn't a real uncle to me, but he's one of Papà's good friends and we consider him family. He is also the great-nephew and heir of the same Michelangelo who was the architect for Saint Peter's and painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

"I didn't know you were in Rome," I said when he released me. "Have you finally admitted Rome is a far greater city than Florence?"

"Never." He smiled a thin-lipped smile. "I've nearly finished my dictionary and the Vatican has agreed to publish it. The Republic of Venice has also offered to publish it, so I'm deciding which city shall have the honor. But no dictionary today. Instead, I shall serve as your guide as we tour my granduncle's greatest works."

As we walked across the piazza toward the massive colonnades that fronted the basilica, I saw the ongoing construction. It was the same all through Rome. Pope Julius and Pope Clement had been great builders who had filled Rome with grand new churches and public buildings. Saint Peter's was by far the largest of the city's building projects and it seemed as if it would never be finished. "Can we go inside the basilica, or just the chapel?"

"Ah, the work on the facade is nearly complete, and Cesari is working on the mosaics for my granduncle's dome as we speak. But neither project should impede our tour, and it is the chapel to which we must devote most of our time. Dear Orazio tells me he wants you to pay particular attention to the Sistine paintings." He grinned at me again, then held out his crooked arm. I took it with pleasure.

We spent an hour inside Saint Peter's, though the massive scale of the basilica made it impossible to see even a tenth of its exquisite beauty in such a time. Michelangelo had redesigned the building's astounding ovoid dome so it was the largest in the world. Workers had completed the dome not quite twenty years earlier, but Uncle and I agreed its grandeur made it worth the three-decade effort. We spared a few quiet minutes in the Pieta Chapel, gazing at Michelangelo's sculpture of Mary with her dead son draped across her lap.

"He was only twenty-four when he carved it," Uncle Michaelo whispered. That anyone could make such reverential beauty, let alone someone so young, astounded me. I sighed a little.

Uncle Michaelo leaned in close. "I know just how you feel," he said, whispering again. Everyone whispered when they stood before the *Pieta*. "To stand in front of such greatness is to confront one's mediocrity."

We left Saint Peter's feeling chastened and small, but the Sistine Chapel's brightly colored frescoes swept away the gray in no time. Every time I visited this chapel, I marveled at the contrast between the building's plain exterior and exuberant interior—like Lavinia's house, but on a monumental scale. Michaelo and I walked up and down the long central aisle, reviewing the wall frescoes. The frescoes had been divided into three tiers, interrupted by six windows on each side. The lowest tier contained mostly paintings of gold and silver draperies, offering little for the eye, while the topmost tier featured cranky-looking popes. But the middle tier, that's where you found the real art—vibrant

portrayals of Moses and Jesus going about their holy business in paintings so vivid, so detailed, they looked like real life.

I stopped in front of Pietro Perugino's *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter*. "I love the blues and greens in this. Everyone says the Botticellis are the finer paintings," I said, waving at the *Temptations of Christ* at the other end of the chapel's north wall, "but he overcrowds his works."

"Botticelli's colors are not so vibrant as Perugino's either," Uncle Michaelo said. "Granduncle liked the bright colors too." Uncle waved his hand at the ceiling. "I'll tell you something few people know. My dear Granduncle didn't want to paint this ceiling. He hated leaving Florence, so he told Pope Julius he'd only take the chapel ceiling job if he could paint God's creation from Genesis. He'd heard the pope wanted scenes from the lives of saints, so he thought the pope would refuse him and hire another artist. But the pope liked the Genesis idea."

"It sounds like Pope Julius tricked Michelangelo," I said.

"Maybe," Uncle Michaelo said with a grin. "You know, my granduncle never really considered himself a painter. He always said he was an architect and sculptor."

I turned my eyes up to the chapel's barrel ceiling. It had once been painted blue with scattered gold and silver stars, or so Papà said. Now it was an overwhelming visual feast. Most of the images were male, though there were some female prophets scattered here and there. All of Michelangelo's women looked like men with breasts, and I wasn't the only one to say so. Roman gossips said the artist had spent too much time with men to

understand the female form. I thought that might be true of many men. They also said Michelangelo had no interest in women in general. It didn't matter much to me; anyone who could paint like him could do as he pleased.

I pointed to a figure seated on painted steps. "See the scale of his Cumaean Sibyl?" I asked. "Her arms are as muscled as a blacksmith's and her legs and feet are massive, as if she sprung from the earth like some old forest god. I tried to do something like that with my second Madonna's lower body, though she's nowhere near so formidable. I also like the hands on the male figure next to her—it looks as if he was fending off a blow, though from where I don't know."

Michaelo stared upward. "I'd never noticed that. He's curiously vulnerable, isn't he? So unlike the Sibyls. The Libyan Sibyl might be a man, she's so muscular and commanding."

As we stared up at those juxtaposed figures, I had a kernel of an idea for my painting. What if I could contrast female vulnerability with womanly strength? That might set me apart from other painters of women. I tucked the idea away for later consideration and returned to my examination of Michelangelo's greatest work.

After a few hours, Uncle Michaelo left me at the piazza gates, claiming he couldn't look at any more paintings. "My brain will explode if I go with you to the Quirinal Palace," he said. "I shall take to my downy bed and contemplate my failures." He kissed me on the cheek and sent me on my way, assuring me he'd join Papà and me for dinner before he returned to Florence.

The papal summer palace lay across the Tiber River, atop one of Rome's famous seven hills and not far from the Coliseum. The air around the river felt hot and heavy and smelled like rotten fish, but as the carriage climbed the hill a breeze freshened and cooled the air. No wonder the last three popes had made the Quirinal Palace their summer home.

A maidservant took me to the Sala del Concistoro, where I found Papà working on a border near the ceiling. When he saw me, he shouted with joy and climbed down the scaffolding quicker than a man his age ought to.

"Agostino, come down," he hollered to a man working on another scaffold. "You must meet my daughter."

The man clambered down and strode over to where we stood. He was a portly fellow, not much taller than myself, with dark hair that curled around his ears. He bowed to me with a dandyish flourish and kissed my hand, his lips lingering wetly a second or two longer than was usual. I resisted the urge to pull back my hand, an impulse Signor Tassi must have sensed. He squeezed my fingers briefly but roughly, then let go, only to meet my eyes with a bold stare. A thinly lashed eyelid slid down into a wink. I was too shocked to do anything but take a step back.

Papà missed the entire exchange, having turned toward the nearby fresco. "Look at this, my daughter," he said. "See how Signor Tassi excels at architectural painting?"

Tassi waved a hand. "Bah, it is nothing. Painting people is the real artistic challenge, and you, Orazio, you are my superior in that."

Despite Tassi's modesty, the work was quite good. It showed

steps and a colonnade in the foreground, then another building behind that, with a fleet of ship masts behind the second building. "It looks so real, I feel as if I could step onto the street," I admitted.

"It's his mastery of perspective that creates that illusion," Papà said. "I could never do that well."

Tassi rocked on his heels. "It is a simple matter of mathematics, architectural drawing, and certain tricks of shading. I could teach it to you in a matter of months."

Papà shook his head. "I am too old to learn, but my daughter is not."

Tassi turned to me. "Your father says you are talented." The man's eyes made me nervous and my lips clamped together so no words could come out. "Ah, a modest young woman," Tassi murmured. "I congratulate you, Signor Gentileschi. So few women these days know to keep their tongues behind their teeth. And she is so beautiful."

Papà chuckled. "She is not usually so quiet. I suspect your talent silences her."

"Perhaps I could give your daughter lessons?" Tassi said, stroking his chin.

"What a fine idea," Papà said. "Don't you think so, daughter? You would be more employable if you could paint the sort of landscape frescoes our friend Tassi does so well."

Before I could answer, Tassi spoke up. "Sir, you don't mean to suggest your daughter would paint in a public place such as this palace. It would be most inappropriate and unladylike."

Papà agreed. "But there are plenty of private houses that

might prefer to hire a woman painter.” Papà waved at Tassi’s fresco and said, “What do you think, Artemisia?”

Tassi took advantage of the fact that Papà had turned his back to stare at me. His eyes began at my chest and traveled down my body, then back up. I wanted to refuse Tassi’s offer, but I had no good reason to. “That sounds fine, Papà,” I said.

He didn’t notice how my voice wavered as I spoke.