

THE
SAINT'S
MISTRESS

• A NOVEL •

KATHRYN BASHAAR

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» • A N O V E L • «

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Books

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his book is for my husband, Allen Bashaar,

who did extra work around the house so I could focus on the book,

who served as my photojournalist in Milan, and

who always encourages me to believe that I can do anything.



AUTHOR'S NOTE



This is a work of fiction. History tells us almost nothing of Saint Augustine's longtime mistress, with whom he did indeed have a son. The facts of Augustine's life, on the other hand, are very well established, and I have used those facts as accurately as possible in my story. The basics of the opening scene in the pear orchard were described by Augustine himself in his *Confessiones*. He did teach in Carthage for a few years, and was converted to Christianity in Milan. He had friends who were very like Amicus, Quintus, Nebridius, and Urbanus, although I have changed some of their names. I had the pleasure of inventing Leona on my own. I hope my readers will enjoy her story.



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I don't know how anyone writes a good book without the tough love of other writers. I offer my heartfelt thanks to my writer's groups at the Beechview and Pleasant Hills libraries here in Pittsburgh, and especially to Audrey Iacone, Claire Coyne, Kathy Hillen, and Genea Webb.



PART ONE

The Lover

C H A P T E R O N E



Thagaste, North Africa
Anno Domini 371

LATER, Aurelius was called a saint, but I first knew him as a thief.

My sister Numa and I walked barefoot the dusty couple of miles between the town of Thagaste and our family's hut in the shadow of the mountains. We knew a shortcut through Urbanus's orchards that avoided the foul-smelling suburbs. Dusk was falling, a time of release: the dirt path releasing the day's heat, the pear trees giving over their perfume to the evening breeze. My mouth watered as I inhaled, imagining the soft flesh of pear on my tongue, the bits of grit, the tough skin, the juice filling my mouth. I was hungry, looking forward to home and supper.

Numa and I always gossiped on the walk home from town, dissecting the little events of our day.

"Ariana will find herself pregnant soon if she doesn't watch out," Numa predicted. "During the noon rest, her and Tracchus, when they thought everyone was sleeping, right in the courtyard. Like dogs," she whispered, although nobody was near enough to hear.

“Dogs?”

“You know: her on her knees and him behind her.” Numa motioned with her hands as if holding on to something in front of her and thrust her hips forward and back a few times. At sixteen, Numa was only a year older than I, but she paid more attention when she heard gossip, and always seemed to know more about secret things.

“Oh.” I blushed and felt a tingling between my legs, pleasant and uncomfortable at once. I teased: “Maybe you want Tracchus for yourself.”

Numa looked away from me toward the pear orchard, tilting her chin. “Not like that . . . not like his bitch.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Tracchus has scars, and I don’t like his teeth. I want someone handsome.”

“You shouldn’t be so particular, Leona,” Numa scolded. Her smooth brown face folded into a frown.

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t be particular about the person I’ll spend my whole life with . . . and have children with. I’m pretty. Men look at me.”

Numa scowled at this. “I know they do, and you enjoy it too much.”

I knew I was pretty, and I did enjoy knowing that men looked at me appreciatively. I was compact and muscular, with a narrow waist and small, high breasts. I had my Berber father’s light skin and my Aitheope mother’s full lips, broad nose and large eyes. I saw no reason why this shouldn’t work to my advantage in a world where girls had few advantages of any kind.

“I don’t want children who look like Tracchus,” I said, drawing my lower lip below my top teeth to imitate Tracchus’s overbite.

“Father will marry you off to whoever offers him the most anyway.”

“I’ll make myself look hideous and act like a shrew, so the ugly ones won’t want me. I’m waiting for someone handsome and good-smelling and smart. And I want a man who really loves me, not just somebody who’s looking for a drudge to cook his porridge and milk his goats.”

Numa snorted. “Good luck.”

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She started to say more, but we both heard the noise at the same time: the slap of sandals in the orchard and the bark of laughter. Three boys burst out of the trees at us, bags slung over their shoulders. They wore the bordered tunics of aristocrats.

One of the boys crashed into Numa, knocking her to the ground and dropping his bag, scattering pears on the path. He kept running.

“You ignorant barbarians!” I yelled. “Watch where you’re going!”

Another of the boys stopped and hesitated over Numa, shifting the bag on his shoulder. Finally, he let it drop and leaned over her. “Are you all right?” he asked. He looked like a young colt, all bulbous joints and round, dark eyes.

His friends stopped now too, several feet away. “Aurelius! Come on!” called the big one who had knocked Numa down. “Who cares about some pleb *lupa*?”

“Are you all right?” Aurelius extended a hand to help her up.

“No, she’s not all right,” I spat. “Your friend knocked her down, you stupid Gaul!”

Numa took his hand and rose to her feet. “I’m fine,” she said, but she glared at Aurelius as she released his hand and brushed the dust off her tunic.

His friends came trailing back over. “Aurelius! Come on!” the big boy urged. His face was scarred. He sauntered closer to us and pinned me with his eyes. “Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he drawled. “Maybe we’ve come across something more interesting than fruit.” He dropped his bag and picked up a pear and held it in front of my face. His eyes were blue, a rare color in our part of the world. I was repelled and fascinated by those eyes, could not look away, could not move.

“Want a pear?” he offered, but his eyes were hooded and his smile was a leer.

I took a half step back, still trapped by those pale eyes.

He turned to Numa. “How about the blackie? You want a pear?” He stepped forward and Numa backed away from him.

“No, thanks,” Numa said. She tried to step past him, but he veered left and blocked her path.

“Come on,” the big boy argued. “Don’t pleb girls like a little fun? Walk back to town, get us some wine and cheese and olives, and then who knows?” He shrugged one shoulder and smirked.

“No, thanks,” Numa repeated and made another try at passing him.

The boy grabbed Numa’s arm. “Not usually a good idea to refuse your betters. Maybe you need a lesson.”

Numa made a face and tried to twist away from him.

I ran at him and slammed my fist into his ear.

“Ow! You she-wolf!” he snarled. He let go of Numa, grabbed my arm with one hand and slapped me with the other. My ears rang and I staggered for a moment, but the boy still had a painful grip on my upper arm.

The slap finally woke up one of his friends, a small, girlish-looking boy. “Marcus, come on. Leave them alone,” he said.

“Stay out of it, Amicus. I intend to give this bitch a whipping,” Marcus snarled. With satisfaction, I noticed a red trickle from his right ear.

Now Aurelius, the boy who had first stopped, spoke up. “Marcus, let’s just go.”

“Stay out of this, Aurelius,” Marcus snarled. “Go home to your mommy, you teat-sucking baby.”

Aurelius flushed, but it seemed he had found his courage. “Marcus . . .” He placed a hand on Marcus’s shoulder and looked him in the eye, “remember our vow? We weren’t going to touch women until we’re eighteen, remember?”

Marcus frowned at me, as if his dilemma were entirely my fault. “I didn’t take a vow not to kill any stupid peasant woman who pounded me in the ear,” he complained.

“Leave it, Marcus,” Aurelius urged. “Don’t act like a peasant yourself. We’re supposed to be better than that. She was just trying to defend the other one.”

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I tried to pull away from Marcus, but he tightened his grip on my arm and twisted it. "You're right, they've probably been had by half the plebs in town already in their little mud hut in the hills. I wouldn't dirty myself with them," he said, twisting my arm until I felt he would pull it out of its socket. "But I reserve the right to personally beat this one until she screams."

Amicus stepped forward. "You'll have to beat me first." He was pale and thin, much smaller than Marcus, but his gaze was as solid as the mountains.

Marcus looked from him to me, then thrust me to the ground. I landed in the dust on my bottom. "The hell with you, then," he said. "Stupid she-wolf!" he spat in parting. Marcus straightened his tunic and he and Amicus started across the next field. Aurelius offered his hand to help me to my feet. I shook my hand out of his grasp.

"You're all right?" he asked.

"No thanks to you," I replied.

His eyes widened and he opened his arms in plea. "But I did help you."

"No, you didn't. I looked to you for help and you just stood and stared. You didn't come to our defense until your friend spoke up."

"But I talked him out of it."

"Talk," I sneered. "Talk about some stupid vow when two women were getting beat up. Who offered to fight for us in the end? Not you. It was your friend, who's half the size of you and that ape dressed up like a gentleman. And look at these perfectly good pears you left lying in the road. You didn't need them. You stole them just for the fun of it."

Aurelius flushed again and hung his head. "Well, then. Good-bye." He turned to catch up with his friends, but looked back one final time and said, "I am sorry."

"Thank you," Numa called, as he disappeared into the now-dark field.

"*Thank* you?" I spat at her. "Why *thank* that pig?"

She shrugged, but she was shaking. Tears had left wavering tracks in the dust on her face. "He helped us."

I masked my own trembling with angry words. “Big help. Those boys are trash, making trouble for nothing. Look at this fruit they wasted. Rich boys with good names and nothing better to do than steal to prove they can do it. I hate them!”

Numa put her arm around my shoulder and said, “Come on. Father will be angry if we’re late getting his supper.”

We padded along on our bare feet again, making clouds of dust on the path, now cool against our soles. “No point mentioning this to Father,” Numa said.

“What good would it do?” I replied.

“Yes, exactly.”

“They get away with everything.” Hate rose in my chest like a jagged stone.

“It’s the way of the world, Leona.”

My long life has since taught me that she was right.



CHAPTER TWO



A TEARDROP of whey hesitated on the goatskin bag. I squeezed the bag and the last of the whey dripped into the clay bucket on the dirt floor of our two-room hut. I hefted the bag from its hook and emptied the cheese into a trough.

I had taken over the cheese making as soon as I could be trusted over a fire and was strong enough to lift the goatskin bag. Numa and I had shared the kitchen tasks since our mother died of a plague when I was eight and Numa was nine.

Numa stirred porridge with a wooden paddle. We were quiet this evening, each of us separately brooding about the attack on our way home.

I was kneading a little precious salt into the soft white cheese when Father and our older brothers, Maron and Tito, arrived home from their work in the fields.

“The number of Romans must be more than the stars in the sky then,” Tito was complaining.

“The poor work and the rich eat. Always been that way and always will be,” Father grunted. He hung his hat on a hook by the door without greeting me or Numa.

“Well, what’s next? What are we supposed to eat?” Maron wanted to know.

“I hope Ammon feels like fucking Murzuk a lot this winter,” was Father’s reply. Father was a casual worshipper of the sun god Ammon and believed that sexual relations between the god and his consort Murzuk, the moon goddess, brought rain.

Father and our brothers sat down at the table and Father cut himself a slice of yesterday’s cheese. Tito and Maron popped olives into their mouths, spitting the pits onto the floor. Our brothers were both tall, like Numa, with smooth, brown skin. They barely resembled our wiry, hawk-nosed father, with his weather-beaten tan face.

“Where’s my supper, daughters?” Father called.

Numa hustled to the table with three bowls of porridge and a loaf of bread. I set a pitcher of whey on the table while Numa got bowls for the two of us.

Father, Maron, and Tito were already slurping porridge when Numa and I sat down.

“What’s wrong, Father?” I asked.

“Grazing lands allowed to the plebs have been cut by half,” he growled. “The lords have to plant more of their acres in grain to feed Rome.”

Distant Rome was the hungriest city in the world, and western North Africa was its breadbasket. In every direction outside Thagaste, mile after mile of golden wheat shimmered in the hot breezes. The vast fields were sometimes owned by local lords like Urbanus, or more often by absentee Roman landlords who might never even see them and instead appointed local bailiffs to operate their acres.

Regardless of who owned them, the fields were worked by plebs like Father, landless peasants who were obligated to provide a certain number of days’ labor to their lord every year. In exchange, they received the right to use small plots for crops of their own, and grazing rights on certain of the lord’s pastures.

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Father was prosperous for a pleb, with goats to graze on the public pastures, cheese to sell, two sons to work the fields with him, and two daughters to send into town to work for cash. If the pasturelands were reduced, he would have trouble keeping his goats alive.

“What will happen?” Numa asked.

Father took a long drink of water and it seemed he would not choose to answer. Finally he responded, “We can slaughter our goats if we have to, and dry the meat. It will last for a time.”

“Why can’t the Romans grow their own wheat and let us use our land for ourselves?” Maron growled.

Father grimaced. “Because they have the army. Or haven’t you noticed?”

“There are more peasants than legionnaires,” Maron muttered, frowning into his cup.

Tito stopped his spoon halfway to his mouth and glanced at Father, waiting for the explosion.

Father set down his cup. There was a short silence before he slammed his palm on the table and then jabbed a finger at Maron. “Now, you listen to me, boy. That kind of talk will get you nothing but crucified in the town square. It’s those crazy hut people putting those ideas into your head. Yes, I know about it. I want you to stay away from them, do you hear?”

Maron pressed his lips together. I could see he was surprised Father knew about his associations. The hut people were a radical faction of the Donatist Christian sect, mostly young men, who stood up for the poor against the lords, and for the Donatists against other Christians. They sought martyrdom, believing that a martyr’s death was rewarded with entrance into their Heaven. They were known to be violent, valuing Heaven so much that they saw death as a release from suffering.

“Bunch of nuts,” Father muttered.

“At least they stand up for something, instead of always knuckling under to Rome,” Maron argued.

“And get themselves killed. For what? So they can go straight to some made-up Heaven? Their god couldn’t even save himself.”

“Their god loves the poor.”

“Their god *is* poor. Does he bring us rain? No. Does he have an army? No. Could he save himself from the Romans? No. Some god. The Romans crucified him, and that’s what they’ll do to you if you don’t stop this foolishness.”

“Brother Luke says their god will return and establish a rule of justice.”

Father snorted. “Let him come back. They’ll crucify him all over again.” He rose and looked at me. “Did you bring the goats back?”

“Yes, Father.”

“All right, then. I’m going out to do the milking.” Before he went through the door, he turned around and drilled Maron with his small black eyes. “Rome is like those mountains out there, boy. They’ll rule the world forever. You can either fight them and be crushed, or you can survive the best you can on their terms.”

CHAPTER THREE



THE NEXT MORNING I hurried toward the cloth shop where I worked, after leaving Numa at the café where she spent her day serving goat meat, watered wine, and flatbread. My work took me into Thagaste six days a week. Miriam, the owner of the shop, was a Christian and did no business on Sunday, her Sabbath.

The empire had been Christian for forty years, but here on its fringes people honored that or not, just as they saw fit. Temples to the Roman gods still flourished, the cult of Mithraism had its adherents, and, like my father, many peasants still worshipped the old Berber gods. Scholars studied Platonism and Stoicism, and might never open the Christian Bible. And, if one did want to be a Christian, what kind of Christianity should they choose? Donatist? Manichean? Caecilian? Miriam was a Caecilian and never stopped trying to convert me.

Although I often teased her by parroting my father's arguments against her religion, I admired Miriam. Ten years older than I, she was a widow with two children, six-year-old Peter and Lucy, three. Her own family had died in the last plague and her late husband's family had agreed to pay for Peter's education but offered no further help, hoping to force her into

another marriage and off their hands. Miriam was a talented weaver, owned her own loom, and made a living for herself and her children. She did well enough that she could pay me to tend the shop and the children while she sat in the back room working at her loom. Her shop and rooms were on the second floor of a narrow building on a side street, above where her brother-in-law, Xanthos, ran a grocery.

The jagged sun had already pierced me, making me squint and pricking my skin with sweat. I passed a public well where children stood in line, the lucky ones shaded by a few dusty trees. As I passed Urbanus's town house, I could hear the gurgle of his courtyard fountain, cooling and refreshing even in its sound. Now I reached the dense part of town, where the stone buildings squeezed shoulder to shoulder and provided some shade. By noon, the stones would have absorbed the sun's heat and would blast it back in my face, but at this hour when I walked into their shadow I felt a sudden cooling that brought out small pimples on my arms and made me shiver once.

I left four cheeses with Xanthos, who sold them in his grocery, and then I hurried up the stairs to Miriam's shop. There was no particular reason to hurry, except I was young then and hurried everywhere.

Miriam sat in the back room at her loom. Lucy crooned to a wax doll wrapped in a scrap of cloth, and Peter raced two clay horses around an imaginary circus oval. The stone rooms were cool and gray except for a knife of yellow morning light slicing through the narrow workroom window, falling directly onto Miriam and her loom. I stopped in the doorway for a second, gazing at my friend, her small hands tying weights to the bottoms of her warp threads. Her black hair was curly and unruly, escaping in spots from its bindings. Her skin and her enormous eyes were both the color of weak tea. She turned those eyes to me now and smiled her slow smile. I loved her more than anyone except Numa.

"Good morning," she said. "I want your opinion on something. Which do you think will be better as an accent thread: this yellow or the red?"

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She already had green and blue warp threads hanging from her loom's heading band, in a random pattern completely unlike the strict geometric patterns of Roman cloth. Miriam's unique designs were becoming popular, and other weavers were beginning to copy her.

"The yellow," I replied immediately. "It will stand out more. Now that other weavers are copying you, you want to keep your customers' attention by creating things that draw attention."

She leaned back a little, as if trying to get a better head-to-toe look at me. "You're a businesswoman, Leona," she said.

"No, just a barefoot goat herder's daughter," I insisted, secretly pleased.



The shop was quiet for a short time, until our first customers appeared. In came the most beautiful middle-aged woman I had ever seen. Her hair, which must have been a rich brown in her youth, was faded and shot through with silver, and her skin was pale and unlined, as if she had always been protected from the fierce North African sun.

But her true beauty was in her bearing. Spine straight, shoulders squared, chin high, she moved with the authority of a man and the grace of a woman.

Behind her stood a young man who must have been her son. Although he was tall, towering over his mother, I at first barely noticed him, so impressed was I by his regal mother. I raised my eyes up to his face and, to my horror, I recognized him. It was Aurelius, the boy who had failed to defend me and Numa against his friend Marcus.

He recognized me in the same moment. Determined not to be the first to look away, I glared at him until he blushed and swiveled his head, as if looking for an escape route.

"How may I help you, my lady?" I asked his mother.

“My son needs a new cloak. He saw a cloak he liked on a man in town, and we found that the cloth had been bought here. The cloth was unusual: the pattern looked like it had leaves of many colors woven into it. My son would like something similar. He would not consent to my choosing it; he insists on making his own choice.” She said this with a frank, wry smile, as if we already shared knowledge of her son’s stubbornness. Aurelius blushed even more deeply.

“I know exactly the cloth you describe,” I assured her. “We have many similar, and my mistress accepts custom orders too. Let me show you what we have first.”

I had gotten used to spreading out bolts of materials for highborn customers. They usually liked me. I was pretty, and I knew how to be deferential and respectful, although I seethed inside at the inequality between us and envied the patrician women their lives of ease and their slaves and fine clothing. Wasn’t I smart? Wasn’t I as good as them?

It seemed to me outrageously unfair that some should have so much and others so little. It especially annoyed me now, to be forced to help select something beautiful for the back of this Aurelius, this careless hooligan who stole for the fun of it.

I turned to the storeroom and regained my composure. I was putting food into the mouths of Miriam’s children and adding to my father’s flock of goats. What did I care what this overgrown boy wore on his back? If his mother bought, I would take a sesterce of what Miriam paid me, and buy a bag of dates to share with Numa on the way home this evening. I smiled as my eyes lit on the perfect roll of cloth for young Aurelius.

“I think I have just the thing, ma’am,” I announced, carrying the heavy roll in my arms. I laid it on the table and unrolled a bit. “Does the young master like pears, perhaps?” I asked, glancing at Aurelius out of the corners of my eyes. “Look at this gorgeous piece: brown, so it won’t show the dust of the road, and look at how my mistress has woven in the design of this

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lovely green. The green comes from Persia, very rare, and such a beautiful color: bright as a ripe pear, don't you think?"

"Do you like this one, Aurelius Augustine?" his mother asked.

"No."

"You're not even looking at it. Come closer. The green is beautiful."

Aurelius shambled over to the table, close enough that I could smell him, a smell not like my father's or my brothers' at all, but a combination of sweat and olives and whatever sweet things must blossom in the cool courtyards where he lounged in front of fountains all day, reading books or whatever men of his social class did whenever they weren't stealing fruit and harassing peasant girls. I pressed my lips together and took shallow breaths, leaning away from him.

"You don't like this?" his mother insisted, and when he didn't reply, she nodded to me. "Bring us a few more, please."

I poked my head into the back room and whispered to Miriam before fetching more bolts of cloth. "A lady I've never seen before," I reported. "She seems important."

Miriam peeked into the sales room. "That's Monnica, widow of the deucile Patricius," she said. "No, she's not anyone that highly placed. She's a Christian," she added. "Do you need me?"

"No. I just thought she seemed important."

"Every sale is important. Call me if you need me. Try to sell the one with the red silk in it."

I scurried back out to the sales room, toting the bolt of dark blue patterned with red triangles.

Monnica gasped. "Oh, this one is lovely! Aurelius, look!"

I noticed his eyes light up. It was one of our nicest cloths, and one of our most expensive because of the silk.

"I had heard your mistress was a Christian," Monnica said, fixing me with a severe look, as if she could already tell I was not and the fact was not

to my credit. “Look . . .” she pointed out to her son. “Triangles. Symbols of the Holy Trinity.”

“Very nice,” he agreed, finally gathering his courage and looking me in the eye. It angered me that his look seemed to cut right into me. I flushed.

“We can get Verturius to line it in red, to pick up the red in the cloth,” his mother said. “This would make a beautiful cloak for you. This is the one you want?”

“Yes. Fine,” he agreed, still looking at me and examining the cloth with his big-knuckled fingers. I itched to smack his hand away.

“Hold this for us,” Monnica ordered. “Our tailor will pick it up when he’s ready to make the cloak, and he’ll pay you.” She didn’t even ask me the cost. I wondered what it would be like to have no need to know the price of the things you wanted. “Come, Aurelius, we have other errands,” she continued. “Good day to you.” She nodded at me without smiling.

I didn’t suppress my smirk as Aurelius followed his mother out the door like her meek slave.

Despite myself, I rushed to the window to watch them climb into their sedan chair. Aurelius looked up and saw me at the window, and it was his turn to smirk, and to tap his forehead in a subtle salute.



I wasn’t surprised when he was waiting for me after work, but I felt obligated to feign anger. “What are you waiting for?” I sneered.

“No, I was just hoping to walk a ways with you.”

“I didn’t think boys of your class walked anywhere. You had four slaves carrying you earlier today.”

I noticed that he carried a rolled scroll, flimsy-looking in his large hands. I had always been curious about what was in the books fine people read, but I was too proud to ask him.

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Instead I asked, "Why did you steal those pears? You're rich. You can eat pears any time you want."

"We're not so rich."

"You could have a pear any time you wanted."

He shrugged.

"So why?" I persisted.

"It was just something to do. My friends were doing it."

"So if your friend had gone ahead and raped me and my sister, you would have done that too?"

"No! I saved you."

"That was your friend."

"And me."

"Oh, maybe a little," I conceded.

We had turned off the dirt side street and the stones of the Cardo Maximus felt warm and rough under my feet. I easily matched his long-legged pace. I walked fast for a small woman. I knew he was looking at me too, and I enjoyed knowing he thought I was pretty, even this boy who I didn't like.

I decided to start another argument. "What does your holy-holy Christian mother think about you running around with a bunch of hooligans who molest helpless peasant girls?"

"I don't tell her everything."

"I'll bet you don't."

We passed the fountain in the town square, where a statue of a smiling maiden let water trickle from her pitcher. A mother fetched her filthy child from the fountain's bowl and gave him a hard slap.

"Are you a Christian?" Aurelius asked.

"No." I paused, but curiosity got the better of me. "Are you?"

"No," he said low, looking around him as though his mother could hear him even here in the square. "No, my mother has enrolled me as a

catechumen, but I've never accepted baptism yet. I don't know. It's almost like believing in magic, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I mean that a man could rise again after death. It sounds like a trick."

I felt compelled to disagree with him. "They don't think he's a man. They think he's God, and lots of gods rise from the dead. Are you saying gods can't rise from the dead?"

"I wonder sometimes if there are any gods at all. Maybe it's just us. Maybe we're in charge of our own fates." He fidgeted with the scroll in his hands, looking around again, as if afraid of being overheard.

I had often thought this myself, but I didn't feel like agreeing with him. "How can there be no gods?" I argued. "Who made the world then?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "I'm hoping to find out by studying philosophy."

"Is there anything in your philosophy about stealing, or about attacking innocent peasant girls on their way home from work?" I asked.

He stopped walking and took me by the shoulders. I shook him off.

"I told you I'm sorry," he said. "I hope you can forgive me. We were wrong to steal the pears and wrong to assault you and your sister. And I've been thinking: you're right. I was wrong not to stand against my friends and defend you from the first. I was a coward and I am sorry."

He looked sorry, and my heart moved uneasily. "There's my sister," I said. "I have to go." And I ran.



CHAPTER FOUR



“YOUR BOYFRIEND’S waiting for you,” Miriam teased.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I shot back on my way out the door.

Aurelius was indeed waiting in the alley and began walking with me, as naturally as if we were brother and sister, as he had for the last three days.

“My cloak is started,” he said. He was carrying a bag of dates.

“I know. Your tailor came and picked up the cloth first thing this morning. It must be very nice to be able to afford something so beautiful.”

“My family isn’t rich, you know.” He popped a date into his mouth and offered the bag to me. I shook my head, although I wanted one badly.

“Could have fooled me, with your slaves and your silk-threaded cloak.”

“Really, we’re not. My father was only a deucile, which involves a lot of responsibility, you know. They have to collect taxes, and they have to contribute to public projects from their own funds. New aqueduct or baths: he has to kick in money. More legionnaires to defend the border: he has to help support the legion. It’s not the greatest job.”

“And someday it will be yours.”

He sighed. “If I became a priest, I’d be excused. But then my younger brother would have to do it; that is, if I don’t take my land with me into the Church.”

“Oh, the problems you rich people have. Anyway, I thought you didn’t believe in any gods.” Changing my mind, I reached over and plucked a date from his paper cone. He had plenty, after all.

“I wish we could be friends.”

“You have other friends. Not such nice guys. They seem like your type.”

“I’d rather have friends who would help me be good.” We walked along without speaking for a few minutes, until he sighed again and said, “What I really want is to be a teacher. I was at school in Madaura for a time, but I had to come home when my father died, and now we don’t have the money for more education. We’re hoping Urbanus will finance me.”

I stopped walking. “Urbanus? The same Urbanus whose orchard you robbed?”

“He was my father’s patron.” Aurelius shrugged, as though it should be obvious to me that Urbanus owed him assistance in spite of his behavior. All Romanized aristocrats patronized families below them in the empire’s hierarchy, and were patronized by at least one man higher than they were. Your patron represented your interests to the government, and kept you out of trouble or provided financial help if you needed it. Nobody above the peasant class could survive without a patron. Even I knew this.

I shook my head, and we started walking again. “Nice way to pay him back.”

Aurelius ignored me. “He’ll probably pay for me to go to school in Carthage if I promise to come back and open a school in Thagaste. Urbanus has big plans for Thagaste. He wants us to be a center of learning and entertainment. We might even be getting a circus.”

A circus would be exciting: chariot races and animal shows, a place to see and be seen.

“Can you read?” he asked me abruptly.

“Only a little,” I admitted. I could sign my name, and read a little bit of Latin and Berber, enough to get by in the shop. I burned with curiosity

The Saint's Mistress

about what was in the books rich people read. The books seemed to set them apart from my own people even more than the luxuries they owned. The silk cloaks and the carriages and the bags of dates were just things. The words in the books seemed to hold the secrets behind those fine things.

“How about if I teach you to read?”

“I can already read enough to do my job.” I tossed my head, trying to ignore my jumping heart.

“You’re smart for a woman. I can see that. You could read Cicero and Ovid.”

I had been intrigued from the start, and now I was flattered too. Still, I felt obliged to keep arguing. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I told you. I want to be a teacher. I can practice on you. It’s free.”

“It had better be free. I don’t have any money.”

“You have a job.”

I gave him a sour look. The boy knew nothing that wasn’t written down in a book. “I hand my wages over to my father.”

“Oh. Will you do it? Will you be my first pupil?”

I really didn’t like this boy, I told myself, but this might be the only chance I would ever have to learn to read, and the idea began to take hold of me. “Oh, all right,” I said.

And so it began.



I lied to Numa. I told her I was staying late in the shop, learning weaving from Miriam. It was the first lie ever between me and my sister. I knew she’d be enraged at the idea of my spending time with one of the boys from the pear orchard, and I suspected she would agree with Father that reading was a waste of time for a woman. Numa wanted nothing more than a husband and babies and a few goats of her own. She started walking

home with a hunchbacked village girl whose family sent her into town to beg every day. After our reading lessons, Aurelius walked me as close to my village as we dared, and I ran by myself the rest of the way.

One evening, three weeks into our lessons, Aurelius and I sat in the courtyard of Urbanus's house, just off the forum. There was a bench under two orange trees that we used as our school, carved marble with acanthus leaves. I hadn't yet met Urbanus. He often had business in the ports of Carthage or Hippo. I wasn't in any hurry to meet the great man. It was enough for me to sit in his magnificent garden, with its orange and fig trees and its serenely flowing fountains. Everywhere in this garden, water flowed. Fish spewed it, mischievous cherubs poured it, a perfectly formed young man pissed it. I could hardly concentrate on the lesson the first time, so dazzled was I by the lavish use of water.

Aurelius had decided we would start with Cicero, his current idol. He couldn't stop talking about Cicero.

"Now try to read this to me," he urged me now. "Remember the sound each letter makes when you come to an unfamiliar word and try to sound it out."

"Is . . ."

"No, no, *are*. Go on."

"Are the pleasures of the body to be sought, which . . ."

"Plato. A great Greek philosopher."

"Are the pleasures of the body to be sought, which Plato describes, in all seriousness, as 'snares and the source of all ills'? The promptings of sensuality are the most strong of all and the most hostile to . . . to . . .' I don't know this word."

"Philosophy. You're doing excellently."

I knew I was, and I was elated. I felt a sense of power in being both pretty and smart, and in sitting in the garden of the great landowner who held power even over my tyrannical father, hearing secret wisdom that my

father had never heard. In my hidden heart, I was also glad to be pleasing to my teacher.

“Keep going,” he prompted me.

The book was written on a scroll, the old-fashioned way, on vellum still creamy from the calf, feeling warm and almost alive in my hands. I rolled up a few more lines and continued, “What man in the grip of this, the strongest of emotions, can bend his mind to thought, regain his reason, or, indeed . . .”

“Concentrate.”

“Concentrate on anything?”

“Excellent, Leona. Now read me the whole thing again, and remember to place emphasis on the important words.” He leaned forward, close to me. His breath had a sweet, fruity wine scent.

“I don’t know why you always say that. All of them are important.”

He pointed to the scroll. “Look, for example, here Cicero is contrasting the pleasures of the body to the pleasures of the mind. You want to emphasize the words body and mind.”

“Oh.” I didn’t really understand, but I knew I could read the whole passage now without hesitating. “Are the pleasures of the body to be sought, which Plato describes, in all seriousness, as ‘snares and the source of all ills’? The promptings of sensuality are the most strong of all, and so the most hostile to philosophy. What man in the grip of this, the strongest of emotions, can bend his mind to thought, regain his reason, or, indeed, concentrate on anything?”

“Oh, well done,” said Aurelius, applauding.

My face warmed with pleasure. I told myself I still hated him, that I was just using him to get something I had never dreamed of getting and that my father would deny me if he could. A part of me knew I was lying to myself. Now, I inhaled the clean, upper-class scent of him, and noticed the black hairs on his bronze arms, coarse and wiry like the hair of a wild

boar. I had an impulse to run my hand lightly over those hairs and watch the pimples rise on his skin.

“Now,” he continued, “stand up and try to recite it from memory, and put hand gestures into it.” He stood and demonstrated, one arm held stiffly at his waist.

“Why?”

“Because that is what great orators do.”

The spell of his scent and his springy black hairs was broken, and he just seemed silly to me. “I’ll never be a great orator. I’m a woman,” I reminded him.

“Then maybe I can make you a better scold.”

I squinted at him, ready to be angry, until I saw a smile pulling at his full lips. I slapped his arm. “You’re an idiot,” I told him.

“Yes, but I hope not to be one forever.”

“I have to go anyway. It’s getting late.”

He took Cicero from my hands and we walked to Urbanus’s garden gate. Herbs grew by the gate, and the sharp scent of rosemary tingled in my nostrils.

We didn’t notice Numa standing outside the gate until we almost bumped into her.

She stepped in front of us, arms crossed.

“Hello, Numa,” I said casually.

“Hello. Care to introduce me to your friend? Oh, wait, I think I know him already. He’s that pear thief and assaulter of innocent peasant women.”

Aurelius bowed. “Guilty as charged,” he admitted.

“Numa, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—” I began.

“Please at least tell me this wasn’t already going on that day,” she said.

“No, no, we never met before that day,” I said. “After that, he came to Miriam’s shop and we started talking and it’s not what you think. He’s teaching me to read Latin.”

The Saint's Mistress

"Yes, I'll bet that's all he wants to teach you. Since we already know him to be a man of great virtue who would never harm a woman."

"Numa, really," I pleaded. "He did help us that day."

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Join us," Aurelius said suddenly.

"Join you?"

"Yes," he continued. "If you're worried about my intentions toward your sister, join us as her chaperone. And you could learn to read Latin too, if you like. I want to be a teacher, and a teacher needs more than one student to make a living."

I felt a stab of panic. At that moment I finally had to admit I wanted him to myself.

"I can't pay you anything," she said impatiently.

"No, of course not. It's free. I'm practicing."

Numa shook her head, her lower lip protruding, her arms still crossed. "What good will it do me to read Latin? What good will it do you, Leona? You'll work for Miriam until you find a husband, and then you'll be busy raising children and milking goats. Reading will only make you want things you can't have."

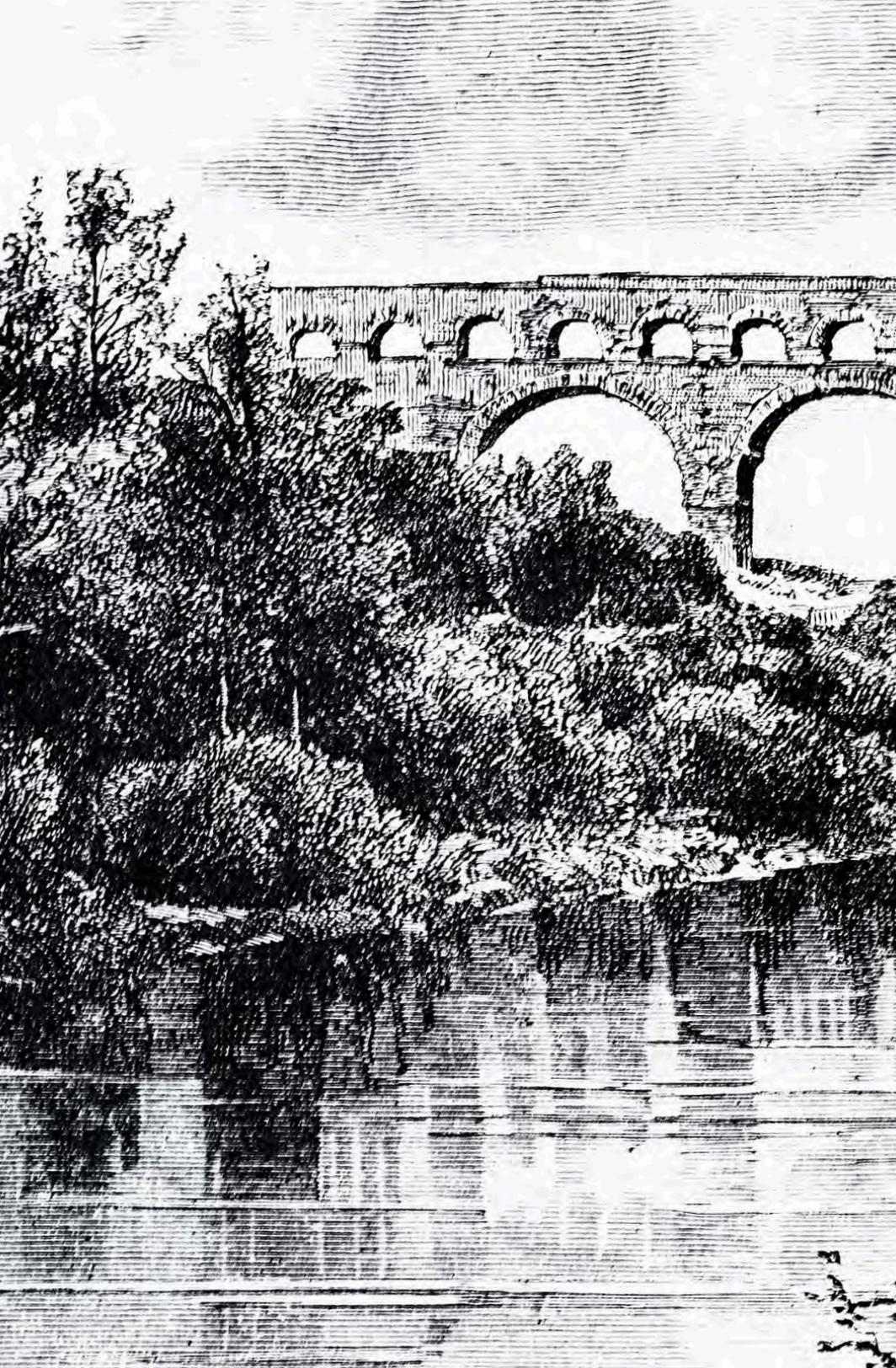
I couldn't find the words for what I wanted to say. I knew Numa was right. I also knew I could not give up my hours in the garden with Aurelius and Cicero.

"Don't worry," she continued. "I won't tell Father. But you mark my words." She narrowed her eyes and pointed to Aurelius. "He wants more than to just sit in a garden and read books with you. And when you find yourself carrying a bastard, don't expect me to help." She swung around dramatically and walked down the path away from us. I had to smile a little. Even in her righteous anger, Numa's gait was leisurely.

"I better follow her," I said to Aurelius.

"Will we still meet tomorrow?" he asked.

I nodded and ran after my sister.





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SAINTS ARE NOT BORN. SAINTS ARE MADE.

When Aurelius found his way to my chamber after dark, while the crickets whistled and the fountain outside trickled under a silver moon, I was not surprised and not afraid. The terrors and alarms of the day had awakened my blood, and the heavy food and wine left me feeling languid and not myself. My determination not to be a rich man's whore seemed like words spoken by someone else, many years ago.

I was barely awake and determined to stay that way. If I could convince myself I was dreaming, I couldn't be blamed for not resisting. And so it was in complete silence that we first became lovers.

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