

THE
SAINT'S
MISTRESS

• A NOVEL •

KATHRYN BASHAAR

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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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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.



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.”

The Saint's Mistress

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.”

The Saint's Mistress

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 decorative flourish consisting of several curved lines, resembling a stylized feather or a calligraphic flourish, positioned below the chapter title.

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.

The Saint's Mistress

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?"

The Saint's Mistress

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.



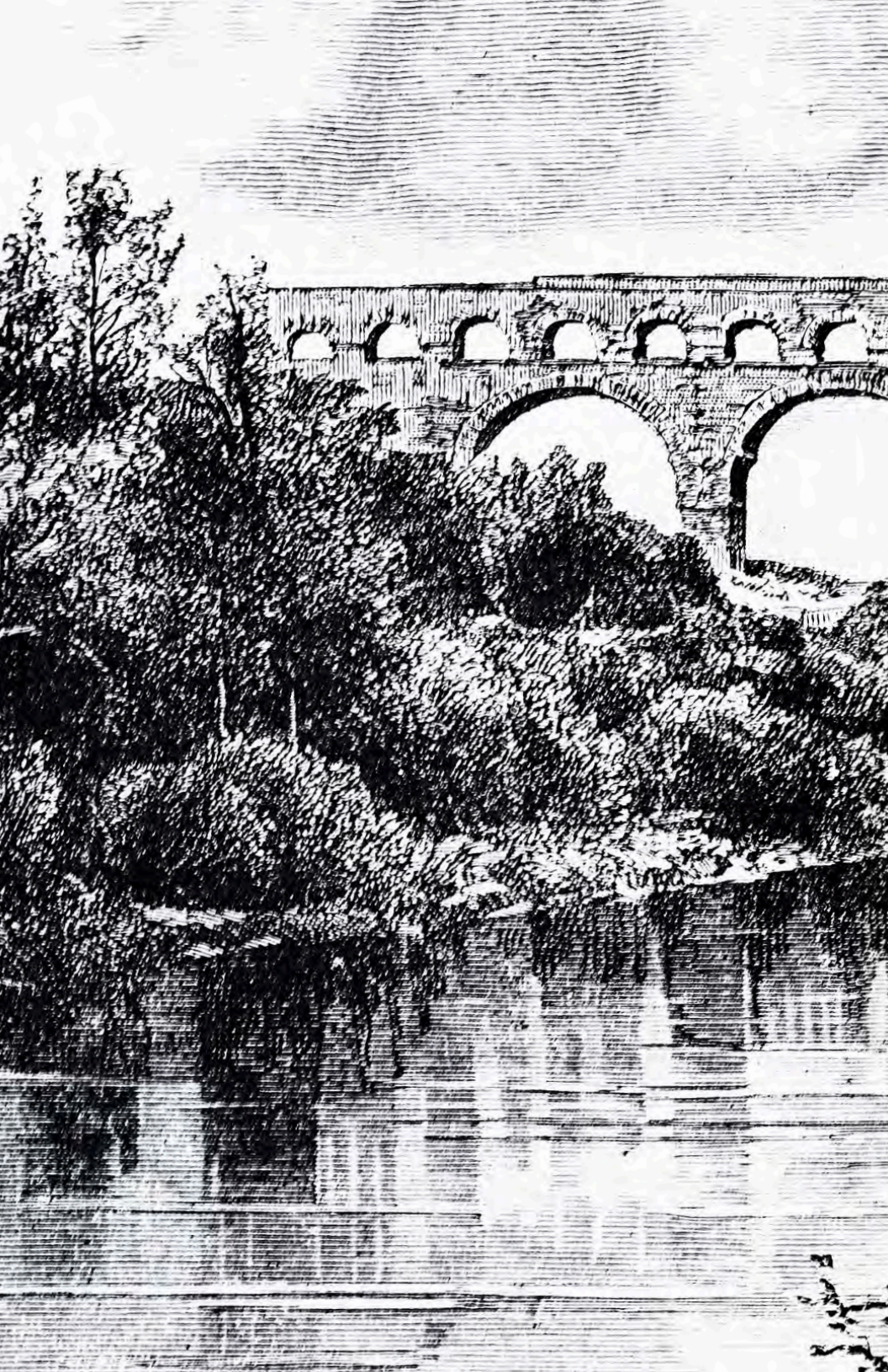
The shop was quiet for a short time, until our first customers appeared. In came the most beautiful middle-aged woman I had ever seen. Her hair, which must have been a rich brown in her youth, was faded and shot through with silver, and her skin was pale and unlined, as if she had always been protected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





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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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