

Benozzo

Emilia Serafini barely dared breathe as she waited for the master's reproach, although she had done absolutely nothing wrong at all. Inside Lorenzo Jacovelli's *bottega*, his famous workshop, beads of sweat trickled down her neck from beneath the brimmed cap she wore low on her head to hide hair that was too long, too glorious to cut. Everyone in Florence knew that painters' apprenticeships were not for girls, so Emilia was disguised as a boy. Wearing a shapeless brown tunic over a coarse linen shirt, she denied her true self.

"The workshop is no place for childish bickering. Go on, both of you. Scrub the courtyard." The enormous man whose panels and frescoes delighted the likes of the Medici and Rucellai was shooing her out the back door, all because of what Luigi had done. Emilia was fuming over the injustice of it all when Jacovelli's emerald ring caught in her cap. It slid over one ear and out tumbled her hair.

Quickly Emilia tugged the cap straight, stuffing her hair back inside, hoping that Jacovelli had been looking anywhere else but the back of her head. Sadly, she was wrong, for in a matter of seconds she felt his grip on her shoulder.

Jacovelli turned Emilia around to face him. Without warning, he removed her cap. Emilia's hair spilled out like golden wheat rippling in the wind. Her heart fluttered in her chest as he stood there quietly, taking a long, close look at his fourteen-year-old apprentice. She braced herself for another reprimand, but clearly he was more surprised than angry. After a thoughtful silence, his lips curved into a smile. "Something tells me your name is not really Alessandro," he said.

"Please, Signor Jacovelli. Don't send me away. I'm a hard worker. I'll do anything you ask."

The towering, gray-haired man shook his head. "You know well enough it is impossible. Even if I wanted to, the guild would never allow it. There are rules about such things."

She looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. Jacovelli merely shook his head.

"Be a spinner, why don't you? That's a fine craft for a lady."

"I don't want to spin!" she exclaimed as Lorenzo Jacovelli walked away from her. "I want to be a painter!"

Dismissed by the master of the *bottega*, Emilia felt she had lost everything she'd ever hoped for. Finding another apprenticeship would be impossible. Her father would have every reason to marry off a daughter who cost too much to keep.

Disappointed and angry with all of Florence, Emilia broke into a run at the Street of the Painters, flying past the butchers' stalls in the Square of the Old Market, making

her way to the Via del Corso, not slowing down until she could glimpse the tall, stone tower of the Palazzo della Signoria to her right and after another block the red-tiled Duomo to her left. From the Street of the Proconsul she turned at the Bargello Palace onto Via Ghibellina and there she stopped running and stood, breathing hard, thinking about what had happened. It was a catastrophe. Luigi had ruined everything—*stupido!* The apprenticeship that would have given Emilia a profession of her own, *her freedom*, was lost.

It began to sink in that Giacomo—the young painter whose dedication and seriousness she admired—had betrayed her as well. It hurt to think that he failed to believe her, especially when she had always been quick to do as he said, unlike Luigi who often had to be asked twice to do something. Giacomo should have known it was not in her character to lie, but then he was always too preoccupied with his painting to notice anything much about her. She felt disappointed in him more than anyone.

The day had started out like any other at the workshop of Lorenzo Jacovelli on Via Tavolini. It was the summer of 1459. Overhead the Tuscan sun seeped into the red brick streets, bathing the surrounding hills and olive groves with warm, amber light. Inside the *bottega*, Emilia sat on her stool at the rough, plank table completing her task. In careful, even strokes, she applied the liquid gesso to the wooden board that would serve as the surface for her master's painting of the Virgin and Child with Saints Peter and Paul. She did not allow her thoughts to wander from her task because the gesso had to be flawless, laid down in even layers that would later be sanded to a smooth, white polish. Though she had been a mere apprentice, Emilia understood that each step of

creating a panel required great care, patience, and exactitude, for these were creations that reflected the holy perfection of the Heavens and the glory of the Republic of Florence.

There was little breeze that morning, but she had willed herself to ignore the heat and to concentrate instead on the task at hand. She told herself suffering was only temporary, while Jacovelli's painting would endure for years to come.

Across the room at another table, Giacomo was applying the undercoat to a panel. He worked silently, following along the pattern that their master had already etched into the gesso with a sharp stylus. As usual, Giacomo paid little attention to Emilia. From time to time she had glanced in his direction, eyed the sheen of his wavy, copper-colored hair, the graceful movements of his hands as he worked, though she was careful to conceal her notice. She supposed that even if she had revealed herself as the young woman she truly was, Giacomo would have kept on painting without skipping a beat.

Emilia used to look forward eagerly to the day when more would have been asked of her, when she would have been allowed to paint like Giacomo, or like Bruno and Enrico, who were off working in fresco at the cloister of the Church of Santissima Annunziata. For now she would be happy just to grind pigments and gesso the panels if Jacovelli would take her back. After all, each painting was created with the combined efforts of many hands. In precise, organized steps, Lorenzo Jacovelli's craftsmen worked together to create the magnificent works that adorned the great churches of their city.

At the end of Emilia's table, old Leonardo, with his characteristic half scowl, had been sanding a large board before the accident occurred. Next to Leonardo, Luigi was grinding pigments with a mortar and pestle. The usual, quiet hum of the workshop was

interrupted when Luigi started singing, *“If a man will not be quick. The span of life is short. A man must not put off his duty.”*

Before long, Giacomo spoke up. “Quiet, Luigi. You know he doesn’t like singing in the workshop.”

“He’s not even here,” the boy retorted, grinding with gusto.

“But the rest of us are,” Leonardo muttered.

The words were barely spoken when an ear-splitting noise filled the room! It was the sound of heavy marble hitting the hard, stone floor with a terrible crash. Emilia had glanced up from her work in time to see the horrified look on Luigi’s face. She knew it matched the look on her own. Instinctively she rose to help, for when she saw the costly, red powder scattered everywhere like dust, she knew Jacovelli would be enraged. If only she had stayed put on her stool and steered clear of Luigi, she thought miserably.

But no, she had gone at once to pick up a scrap of paper to salvage the precious mineral from Spain that was used to make vermilion red. “Perhaps some of it can be saved.”

Emilia recalled that Giacomo had come hurrying over and stood looking down at the quantity of scattered dust. He shook his head. “The master will be furious about losing so much cinnabar.”

“He doesn’t have to know about it,” Luigi retorted.

“We keep nothing from Jacovelli,” Giacomo rebuked him. “Try to save what you can of it.”

Emilia and Luigi were down on their knees attempting to salvage the pigment when the front door opened to admit the imposing form of Lorenzo Jacovelli. He was

returned from the Donati family chapel that he had been inspecting for a new series of frescoes.

“What’s the commotion about?” he barked, taking immediate notice of the two young apprentices who, bent low, were scurrying around like mice on the floor.

Alarmed, Emilia had looked up but said nothing.

Giacomo was the first to speak. “I’m sorry, sir. Luigi dropped the mortar.”

Then Jacovelli had come to inspect the powder of cinnabar sprayed every which way across the floor. “Such foolishness, Luigi,” he admonished. “You had far too much pigment in the mortar.”

Luigi flushed scarlet and blurted, “Alessandro bumped into me!” He turned accusingly to Emilia with the boldfaced lie.

She ought to have defended herself but was afraid to speak up. She had not wanted to make an enemy of Luigi, she preferred to remain as inconspicuous in the workshop as possible lest too many questions be asked of her.

“He wasn’t looking where he was going,” Luigi contended.

“I came over here to help you after you dropped the mortar, Luigi,” she said. “Tell him, Giacomo.”

The mild-mannered painter, apparently unsure of whom to believe, had looked from Emilia to Luigi in bewilderment. “I honestly can’t say. I didn’t see how it happened.”

“Luigi’s been too busy talking and singing this morning to pay attention to his work, if you ask me,” Leonardo said without a pause in his sanding.

“It was Alessandro’s fault,” Luigi had insisted.

“But I was just sitting here preparing the panel,” Emilia protested, the color rising in her face. “I was nowhere near Luigi. Tell him, Giacomo.”

Jacovelli had raised his hand to silence her. “Time and money have been wasted and now Leonardo will have to make another trip to the apothecary. Your fathers will hear of this.”

Taking firm hold of both Emilia and Luigi, he ushered them to the back door. That was when his ring caught in her cap and her disguise was discovered.

It was a disaster. Furthermore, Jacovelli might hold her and Luigi accountable for the cost of the lost cinnabar. Her father would be unforgiving when he got wind of the situation. It had been almost impossible to convince Francesco Serafini to pay Jacovelli four florins a year for the privilege of his teaching, as was the custom. Now he would blame her for spoiling the opportunity she had been granted and wasting his money as well.

Devastated by the day’s events, Emilia came at last to her little two-story frame house on Via Ghibellina. Trudging slowly to the front door, Emilia dreaded admitting defeat to her father, though her mother would lend a sympathetic ear. Her mother would understand her despair because it was her mother, Violante Serafini, who had understood Emilia’s dream well enough to suggest the outrageous charade in the first place.

“If we don’t let her try, then she’ll never know if she can do it,” Violante had said, determined to persuade Emilia’s father.

“You indulge her too much. She needs to understand the way things are in the world,” Francesco Serafini insisted. “The sooner she accepts the fact the guild won’t have her, the better.”

“They’ll accept her if they think she’s a boy.”

“You would have our daughter disguised as a boy, Violante?”

“Do you mean it, Mama?” Emilia said, poking her head in the room.

Appalled, Francesco looked at his wife. “Dio Mio! You are serious, aren’t you?”

Now that her hard-won apprenticeship was lost, her father would surely decide the time was right to move forward with the marriage contract he was always holding over her head. He would have her betrothed to Benozzo Balducci—ten years her senior, oily-skinned, humorless, and exacting with numbers. Her father did not care that the thought of living with Benozzo made Emilia cringe. What mattered was that he could be trusted to keep the books and manage the small saddle shop Francesco owned.

While she suffered this horrible fate, Luigi, who caused her predicament, would be sitting at *her* worktable as though nothing had happened. She was a far better apprentice than he was and Jacovelli knew it.

Her mother would understand. Emilia hoped Violante would be back from the tavern, where she delivered the meat pies and *tortas*, or cakes, prepared in the family kitchen for her father’s customers. When Emilia walked into the kitchen, she was relieved to find her mother shelling peas from the garden.

“Tell me what happened,” Violante said as soon as she saw her daughter’s long face. Though she was near forty, Violante was often mistaken for a much younger woman. She wore a simple but flattering rose-colored work dress, and her honey-colored hair was gathered in a heavy knot at the nape of her neck.

“Jacovelli discovered I’m not a boy. All because I tried to help Luigi when he dropped the mortar,” Emilia said, flopping down on the wooden bench across the table from her mother. Breaking into tears, she related everything that happened at the workshop. “Luigi is despicable! How could he have done such a wicked thing?”

Violante stroked her daughter’s cheek. “There, there, *cara*. It’s not over yet. There’s always another way.”

“How? Every other workshop in Florence will know of me now. No one will have me. Everything is ruined!”

Violante looked out the window, far off into the hills, the way she did when she was dreaming up a plan. Her large green eyes grew mysterious. Then she turned to her daughter and said, “Don’t suppose that because you tried once, you have done all you can. Your will is simply being tested.”

“It’s impossible. If no one will teach me, how can I learn?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, Emilia. I do know that when you believe something is possible and you want it more than anything, then God is on your side.”

“What will you tell Father?” Emilia knew he would have little patience for another of her and Mother’s schemes. No doubt, he would try to put an end to her fanciful notions once and for all. Always there were too many bills and not enough

customers but the bills had to be paid. And Emilia was the only one, her father liked to remind her, who failed to contribute to the family's income.

Violante thought for a moment. "We don't have to say anything right away, Emilia. There's no sense in worrying your father until you've found the solution."

"But Signor Jacovelli will demand payment for the cinnabar."

"I have a little money for such emergencies," Violante said slowly. "I will take care of Signor Jacovelli."

Emilia nodded, wanting to believe her mother, but not quite knowing if she could. Violante sliced an orange, sprinkled the wedges with cardamom and sugar and arranged them like a flower on a green ceramic plate. Emilia ate the sweet fruit quietly before slipping upstairs to her room to read from the book that had been in the family for years and years. Mother said she should read *A Manual to the Science of Alchemy* when she was lost and could not find her way.

Emilia kept the alchemical text in a painted chest, beneath her wool undersocks and embroidered purse. Just a little longer than the palm of her hand, the book had a reddish-brown leather cover. It was hand-tooled with a geometric pattern of intertwining roses and gold lettering. Long ago, the book had belonged to Emilia's great-great-great grandmother, *Nonna* Santina, who was said to have been a midwife, skilled in the uses of remedies and herbs. Passed down through the generations, Violante had given it to Emilia on the recent occasion of her fourteenth birthday.

"I've used the book all my life, Emilia," Violante had said. "I suspect you will use it as well. Right now you might not understand how, but the manual will

guide you. When you find yourself at a loss, as we all do at times, I want you to remember this book. You will hear my voice within the pages, and your Nonna Chiara's voice, and your great-grandmother Elena's voice, and your great-great-grandfather Pietro's voice, and your great-great-great-grandmother Santina's voice. Whatever you do, you must never let the book out of your possession. Never. You must promise."

When she first received the manual, Emilia glanced at the intricate illustrations with fleeting curiosity, skimming through the strange passages. The first page attributed much of the work to a man known as Isaac the Jew, priest, adept in the Cabala, and master of the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone. The book contained numerous excerpts from ancient texts, passages from Plato and Hermes Trismegistus—the philosopher from Egypt—and recipes for the precipitation of metallic gold. Emilia considered the book a curious relic from the past, a family heirloom. It was sacred to her mainly for the reason that it had traveled back and forth from Spain and been passed down through the generations. Yet as she sat in her room on the day she lost her apprenticeship, she remembered her mother's words and wished it were true that the manual held an answer. *When you find yourself at a loss, I want you to remember this book.*

Emilia spoke aloud. "So now I am at a loss, *Nonna Santina*. What can your book tell me? What can I possibly tell my father so that he doesn't insist that I marry Benozzo?"

She closed her eyes as a warm breeze blew through her open bedroom window, turning the pages with an invisible hand. The spirits of her grandmothers and her grandfather Pietro were always present, Violante liked to say. Could her mother be speaking the truth about alchemy? Opening her eyes, Emilia stared curiously at the page chosen by the wind and read a passage written more than a century before.

Know this: thou art not born to suffer an unalterable fate and wicked destiny. Rather, thou art born to dominate the world and create! Yet this God-given right is oft forgotten. Children who come to this earth believing in the promise of life grow up to limit their imaginations and accept defeat. Corrupted to see themselves as weak and powerless, hopelessness, fear, and poverty prevail.

Yet this is not what God, in His infinite wisdom, has ordained. Rather, achieving the desires of the heart and mastering of the physical world by persistent efforts are the noblest of endeavors....

For sufficient reason, the methods employed by the masters have been shrouded in secrecy.

Looking up from the strange writing, Emilia gazed into the cloudless, Tuscan sky. *Nonna's* ancient manual would have her believe that everything was not in ruins simply because Luigi had spoiled her opportunity with Jacovelli. Yet now, as she sat in her little upstairs room, it was hard to see how she could ever become a painter without an apprenticeship.

Violante was always telling her she could do anything if she tried hard enough. When she was a little child, desperately wanting to make lovely pictures like the ones she saw on the walls at church, she struggled to make the lines of a limb, a hand, or foot look as they were supposed to. Though she sometimes felt like giving up entirely, her mother would encourage her to continue.

You cannot try once or twice or even a hundred times and say it's no use, Emilia. God will help you if your desire is genuine. But do not wait for Him to make you a great artist. This is your task, Emilia. Be an artist if you will. If you must. This is something for you to decide.

The words of her mother and her grandmothers would not allow her to sit there sadly, wallowing in self-pity. They were challenging her to take hold of herself, but she could not see a way out of the darkness. A future with Benozzo Balducci, who was nothing more than an asset to her father's business, loomed directly in front of her like a bad dream.