

PART ONE



Lieutenant John D. Skilton Jr.

Würzburg, Germany, 1945

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It was raining the day John Skilton arrived in Würzburg. The skeletal walls of the city glistened with water. Little rivulets flowed down mountains of rubble, collected in the tank ruts, and pooled in the impact craters that scarred the roads. *The ruins didn't smoke*, he would say later, *they only dripped*.

That was an understatement — most of what Skilton said after the war was understatement, delivered in a quiet voice laced with cigarette smoke. He always made a point of emphasising that he arrived in Würzburg — indeed he arrived everywhere — after the fighting was over. The Wehrmacht had fled to the east. Hitler had been dead for two months. *My nemesis*, he liked to say in a wry way, *was the Army Corps of Engineers. Those so-and-sos kept stealing my lumber*.

But it was really the rain that was Skilton's powerful, relentless enemy in Würzburg. All through the four months he spent in the city, it pounded down. The local people, huddling in the flooded cellars of their ruined homes, said they had never seen a summer like it. It was as though nature, in some purgative reflex, was trying to wash the last remnants of the shattered city back into the soil. After what Skilton had witnessed since he landed on Omaha Beach almost a year earlier, he could see how it was possible that nature, or even God, might want to scour Europe clean and simply start again. And yet it was his job to pick through its ruins, to see what could be saved: Skilton was a Monuments Specialist Officer. Würzburg was his assignment. When he saw it

he felt like turning around and swimming back home.

He first saw the city from the lurching cab of an army truck, pinned between the driver and the young captain who was acting as Fine Arts Officer for the Military Government Detachment. The captain's name was Hauser and he had no idea what Skilton was doing there.

"So how do you rate this, Lieutenant? What do you make of the handiwork?" Hauser was a thickset young man with black hair that was slick with oil or rain. He came from Michigan and before the war he sold tyres, he said. From the sidelong way he was peering at him, Skilton knew he must look all wrong to the younger man, too clerkish, too old for a second lieutenant, with his thinning hair, his tie neatly knotted and tucked between the buttons of his shirt.

"I'm sorry?"

"Did they do a good job?" Hauser jerked his thumb out the window. The truck was passing a handsome three-storey townhouse. Its windows had all been blown out, but its carved façade appeared untouched. As they passed by, Skilton saw without surprise that the building had no roof and no back. The façade rose from the rubble like a theatre set for a different play than the one they were performing. He understood: Hauser was challenging him to be shocked by what he saw.

"They told me you came up the Saar valley with the Seventh Army. How does this compare to down there?"

The driver shifted down, knocking his knuckles against Skilton's knee. The road they were travelling on had been scraped clear of debris, but the side streets were still blocked with landslides of shattered bricks and roof slates. A woman wearing a headscarf picked her way along the base of a rubble mountain, her market basket over one arm. The humid air stank of dank ash, sewage and mould.

Skilton tried to make his answer sound world-weary and matter-of-fact. It was important that he appeared to accept the destruction, the way everyone around him did. It was important that he acknowledge its purpose.

“All the cities are like this,” he said cautiously. “I was in Heilbronn, Augsburg. The outskirts are sometimes intact, but the centres are always gutted. I suppose they aim for the centres.”

“They did this one in March,” Hauser volunteered, tapping the back of his hand against the window.

Skilton felt his heart lurch. “In March? That’s very late.”

“You’re telling me. They didn’t even get around to it until the middle of the month, about six weeks before the Nazis surrendered. It wasn’t what you’d call a strategic position.”

Where had Skilton been in March? What exactly had he been doing when this city was destroyed? His hand moved instinctively to his shirt pocket. There he carried a small notebook, containing page after page of jotted information about Würzburg. It wasn’t much, but it was all he could glean on a single afternoon at the headquarters in Paris where he reported to be given this assignment. Yet it was enough to tell him that Würzburg had been a kind of Baroque jewel-box, with exquisite churches, palaces, gardens, an ancient fortress, museums, a university and several notable private collections of art. While he was making his notes, he’d begun to worry that he was ill prepared to handle the task of protecting such a wide variety of cultural treasures. Now, gazing out of the rain-splattered windows of the truck, he wondered if he’d find anything at all left to save.

“Who did it?” They passed the burned-out shell of a German tank abandoned on the side of the road. Even as he asked the question, Skilton knew the answer didn’t matter.

The British carried out the bombing, Hauser said. The RAF sent some two hundred Lancasters and probably a few Mosquitoes

to drop incendiaries and high explosives. Hauser was a bit of an actor, Skilton observed, a bit of a comedian. He clenched his fists then flicked his fingers wide to mimic blasts. He puffed out his fleshy cheeks to make booming sounds. "It was all over," Hauser said with appreciation, "in about twenty minutes."

"They say the local Gauleiter sat out the bombing in the only air raid shelter in town," he told Skilton. "Then he sneaked off at night with his family. They're still looking for him, and when I say 'they' I mean the people from *here* are looking for him. Know what? I hope they catch him before we do. That would serve him right. He was a *dentist*, of all the crazy things."

"Never trust a dentist," Skilton said, glad to be certain of something.

Hauser grunted. "And just look at this mess they left us." He waved his hand, taking in the wet wreckage of the city. "I signed up to be a soldier, not a janitor."

"I'm guessing you didn't volunteer for fine arts duty, Captain," Skilton said. It was no use admitting to this glossy captain how glad he was for any chance to do some significant cleaning up. So far, his most useful tool for fine arts conservation had proved to be a wheelbarrow.

Hauser growled. "Let's just say next time I'll think twice before I tell my superior officer I like Norman Rockwell." He studied Skilton out of the corner of his eye. "How about you?"

In the hour since he'd arrived in Würzburg it had become clear to Skilton that the captain had no idea what a Monuments Specialist Officer was supposed to do. This was not a new experience for him. No one in the US military seemed to know. He usually found it was better to skip the explanations and just do what he could. But he was going to be working with this captain for some time, so he took the plunge.

"Strangely, this is my field," he said. "I was working as a re-

searcher for a museum when I was called up — the National Gallery, in Washington, D.C. That's why I joined the Monuments Specialist Service. Not that I've been able to achieve much so far. I keep getting hijacked. They had me working as a translator in Civil Affairs until a few weeks ago."

"Is that so?" Hauser looked more suspicious than ever. "Someone told me you speak Kraut."

Skilton smiled, pleased that his reputation preceded him. "That's probably because I speak French," he said.

They came to the Main, a wide ribbon of water flowing through the centre of the city. The Germans had blown the bridge as they retreated and the Army Corps of Engineers had spanned the breach with a construction of iron, strong enough for one vehicle to pass at a time. The truck slowed to a crawl as it joined a line of vehicles waiting to cross. As they waited, Skilton looked across the water at what was left of the old town. The destruction on that side of the river seemed total. Every roof was gone, every window was empty, piles of smashed buildings lay in the street. It was difficult to believe there had ever been a city there to begin with.

They crossed over water dark with silt, breaking in little eddies against the remaining bridge pilings. They continued into town, moving slowly to avoid pedestrians. From time to time the driver had to blow his horn at someone who had strayed into the road. The locals moved sluggishly, like people in shock, and Skilton supposed that's exactly what they were. Würzburg had been spared violence throughout most of the war. Then in just a few minutes the city was reduced to rubble and ash. The people on the street kept their eyes fixed on the ground, scarcely glancing up when the truck passed. Now and then the metallic stink of carrion blew through the vents into the cab.

They inched toward the city's cathedral, the Church of Saint Killian. Skilton saw that its towers were still standing and fought the impulse to call out to the driver to stop. *Later*, he thought, averting his eyes as they jolted past the broken building with a sense of shame, *I'll come back for you later*. He felt like a field medic carrying out triage, sorting through the wounded, identifying those least likely to die. The cathedral was on his list, but it wasn't his first priority.

The truck emerged suddenly from the ruin of the old town onto an immense open plaza. It had once been a parade ground paved with smooth slabs but the bombs had harrowed it into a landscape of crater dells and rubble hillocks. Slender shoots of bright green grass sprouted from every crack, bending sharply in the stiff wind. The driver steered the jolting truck through puddles like round dew ponds toward a horizontal structure that seemed to spread out its arms to greet them.

Skilton leaned forward and wiped the condensation from the inside of the windshield. He felt his heart beating powerfully against his precious notebook. This was the Residence of Würzburg's Prince-Bishop and it was the first item on Skilton's list.

"It looks better than I was led to believe," he said to Hauser somewhat breathlessly. "At headquarters they told me it had received a direct hit, but I see the walls are intact, the statues are still standing up there on the parapet. This is a nice surprise."

Hauser didn't say anything. He just gave Skilton a strange comical look as though he had said something funny. Then he opened the door into the rain and jumped down into a puddle.

The Prince-Bishop's ceremonial staircase was just like a set in a Hollywood musical. That was Skilton's first, frivolous thought

as he entered the building. The pale risers ran up from the dimly lit circular vestibule like a vertical stage and Skilton couldn't stop himself from imagining a troupe of dancers in top hats and tails stepping and kicking down it. His second thought was that the stairs were reasonably dry and clean. The smell of burning hung in the air but there was no trace of water, no large rubble cluttering the stone steps.

He and Hauser began to climb the staircase. With some reluctance, Skilton forced himself to keep his head raised, his eyes lifted, even though he was still afraid of what he might see. He knew that any problem he identified now would be his to fix and no one else's. It made part of him want to keep his eyes shut, but another part of him was carried away by the unexpected joy of finding this part of the Residence still standing. It was incredible. One wing of the palace had received a direct hit. Other rooms had been gutted by fire. Yet this section, the heart of the structure and the part that contained its most irreplaceable treasures, remained standing.

The space seemed to expand around them as they climbed up. Skilton heard the immensity of the hall before he could properly see it. Their heavy boots rang against the stone steps and the noise echoed back at them from above, suggesting a vast, enclosed emptiness. Into this they climbed from the darkness of the vestibule, arriving on a mezzanine that embraced the opening of the staircase. Up there, the windows had been blown in. They were only partially boarded over and rain blew in with cold gusts of wind. The stone floor was heaped with shattered glass and broken window frames. The light was dim, but it was enough to see the contours of the vault arching above them. Skilton unclipped his flashlight from his belt and trained it upwards. He almost jumped with shock. The beam fell on the head of a gigantic dark-skinned woman in a feathered headdress. He played the

light down her body — golden ornaments, a powerful, sinuous leg — to find she was riding on a monstrous alligator.

America. Skilton was no expert in iconography, but he recognised the allegorical figure. Playing the beam over the surface of the vault, he quickly located the figures of Asia, Africa and Europe, all giantesses accompanied by their totem animals: a camel, an elephant, a bull. There were gods on the ceiling, too: Venus, her body stretched at full length along the slope of a cloud, Mars in his decorative armor, and, in a blaze of pale yellow sun, a naked Apollo holding a lamp aloft. Girls with butterfly wings restrained white sky horses. River gods lounged on the rim of the dome. Skilton estimated there were about a hundred figures, flying, seated on clouds, parading along the four sides of the room.

A shiver of delight went through him. “The frescoes are still here,” he said. “They’re still intact.”

“So it seems.” Hauser was standing to one side gazing through a gap in the boards nailed across the open window. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and held one out to Skilton.

“It’s beyond anything I expected,” Skilton went on, taking the cigarette. “I thought we might be able to save a few pieces, fragments, maybe a section of the ceiling. But this is incredible. It looks like the entire fresco has survived. I can’t believe our luck.” His laugh echoed back sharply from the vault above. He felt like dancing, step-kicking down the staircase himself. “And the illusion is extraordinary,” Skilton said, aware of Hauser’s eyes on him. “Can you see what he’s done? Even in this dismal light, my God, it’s like looking at a real sky.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew they were idiotic. The real sky was full of rainclouds, warplanes and smoke from the fires of the displaced. The real sky was the one he had feared to find above the Staircase Hall, leering at him through obscene cracks in the plaster. What he found instead

was a false sky, whole, blessedly unreal, adorned with gods and winged creatures and flooded with a serene golden light from elsewhere. *Elsewhere*. The sight of it made Skilton forget why he was there and returned him for one merciful moment to the state of innocence he had enjoyed as a tourist in Europe before the war. It seemed incredible to think of it now, but he and his best friend had spent a whole summer travelling in France, Italy and Germany, drinking in the culture, seeing buildings and paintings and sculptures he had only read about in his Art History courses at Yale. Everything he saw thrilled him. But although he had seen so many beautiful, noble things on his grand tour, he had never seen anything like this ceiling.

“There’s more of it,” Hauser said finally, holding out a match.

“More?” Skilton reached for his notebook.

“Yeah. It’s even fruitier than this, if you can believe it.”

Hauser walked him through a pair of doors and into a smaller, square room, half of it in rubble on the floor. They then entered a third room. This was the Imperial Hall, the throne room of the Residence. Skilton had made a note of it back in Paris, but nothing in the records prepared him for what he saw. Once again he had the giddy sense of the ceiling being lifted from the building and the sky flooding in. Above them soared a lofty cupola, its dome pierced with round windows. The light was dimmer here, the boarding was more thorough, but Skilton could just make out a fantasy interior of swirling stucco, marble and gold.

“Astonishing,” he said, feeling another wave of wonder that such a delicate human contrivance could have survived the force of bombs. Again, the room seemed largely intact. The beam of his flashlight revealed frescoes framed by huge stucco curtains on either end. One scene showed an emperor on a throne; another what looked like a wedding. A handsome blond girl in a blue dress kneeled in front of a bishop, her bearded groom attentive at her side.

“Well, this has to be some kind of a miracle,” he said with a catch in his voice. “We’ll never know how it happened but the major staterooms seem to have escaped untouched.” He was already thinking about how to rearrange his list. He’d inspect the chapel of the Residence next, which he knew had received a direct hit in the air raid. Then he’d move on to the Cathedral of Saint Killian, then the Marienkirche, then the fortress.

He took another moment to study the ceiling further. It was another piece of painted sky, punched through the top of the cupola and framed with a gilded moulding. The scene showed a golden chariot being pulled through heaven by rampant white horses. In it sat a plump blond girl with a string of pearls around her neck, the same one who was shown getting married in the wall fresco. She had a serene look on her radiant, rosy young face, but her arms were outflung in a dramatic gesture as she rushed to embrace her bridegroom, her future and her glory.

There was something sweetly ordinary about this figure, Skilton thought. In the midst of so much supernatural activity — angels soaring, horses pawing thin air, deities and demigods crowding the margins — the girl in the flying chariot looked like someone he might know, a niece or the daughter of a friend or the teenager that served him his sandwiches in the coffee shop back home. She wore a calm, slightly empty expression, like someone passively enjoying a ride in the country and looking forward to a nice lunch at the end of her journey. The cleverness of Tiepolo’s choice made Skilton smile. Putting this robust, pretty, commonplace girl at the focal point of his heaven made the grandiose scene seem far more human and, in a mysterious way, far more real.

Hauser’s voice came from the shadows beside him. “Now I feel bad, Lieutenant,” he said.

Skilton was still buzzing with relief and gratitude. Gratitude to

the RAF for missing something with their bombs, gratitude to Hauser for showing him the thing he most wanted to see: a treasure, surviving. On impulse he put out a hand to pat Hauser on the shoulder, then quickly pulled back, realising such an intimate gesture might be inappropriate. “Why should you feel bad? This is the best break I’ve had in months.”

“I feel like I’ve played a dirty trick on you,” Hauser answered. He sounded uncomfortable. “I didn’t think anyone could really care that much about this stuff. Not now.”

Skilton felt the grin fading from his face. “I’m not following you,” he said.

Hauser took a deep breath and pointed upwards. “Hear that?”

Skilton listened. It was almost completely dark now and his eyes roamed up through the shadows toward the apex of the dome. Into the darkness came the steady hiss of the rain, an uncomplicated sound that any child would recognise. Every so often the wind would lift and the pitch would increase; then it would fall and the sound of the slowing rain would drop to a patter. “All I hear is the rain on the roof,” he said nervously.

Hauser shook his head and gave an ambiguous laugh. “You didn’t see it when we got out of the truck. But then I guess that’s not your fault. The visibility’s bad, couldn’t be worse. It’s hard to get a fix on it. The angle is — ”

“What?” Skilton interrupted. “What did I miss?”

“You missed what the RAF didn’t miss,” Hauser said too loudly. “There is no roof. The bombs that landed on the square, in front? They blew it right off. Boom: flat top.” Hauser chopped a hand over the dome of his helmet. “Man, you should see your face right now! I hate to be the one to break it to you, Lieutenant.”

“There’s no roof.” Skilton repeated the words, numb and perplexed. All at once he decided that Hauser was ribbing him. He was just the sort of wiseacre to do such a thing, having a laugh at

the expense of the older man, getting his digs in early. Skilton, so often the butt of his comrades' jokes, had mastered the art of being a good sport. He tried to laugh it off. "Oh, you're funny, Captain. You had me going there for a minute. If there's no roof what are we looking at, then? What's keeping the rain out?"

"What we are looking at here is the vault," Hauser said. "Do you get me? *Just the vault.* A few inches of plaster, one or two iron ribs, a lick of fancy paint with nothing on top of it but — nothing. If you don't believe me you can ask the Kraut architect, Bosslet. He'll tell you all about it."

A feeling of revulsion swept through Skilton as Hauser's words sunk in. He'd had the same feeling collecting dead soldiers from the battlefield. Some were in pieces, and that wasn't so hard, somehow, it was honest. But some looked whole when you came to them, untouched, like boys who had died in their sleep. At least they looked that way until you turned them over and found the gaping exit wound. The vault was the same. It looked sound but the truth was that it was doomed and it could come crashing down at any moment, burying him and Hauser alive.

In his imagination, Skilton saw the rain slowly seeping into the plaster, dissolving the painted sky. He saw the ceiling fall, reduced to elemental chunks of gypsum and pigment, revealing a ribcage of blackened iron bones and thrusting the terrible, real sky into the beautiful room. The image shook him to the core. Suddenly, the girl in the chariot, the one who seemed so immediate and so ordinary and so lovely, appeared to be holding out her arms in supplication to him. *Save me.*

Skilton shook it off. The idea was ridiculous, and it wasn't going to help him. Above all he couldn't let Hauser see what this news did to him. He needed Hauser. He took another deep breath and switched off his flashlight as though he had seen enough.

"Well, if that's the case," he said, "we don't have much time."

Würzburg, Germany, 1945

“Time for what?” asked Hauser.

Skilton didn’t answer because he didn’t know what the answer was. He walked as calmly as he could to the top of the staircase and started down.

PART TWO



Cecilia Guardi

Venice, 1718

Venice, 1718

When they reached the Campo San Rocco, Antonio's plan for ruining Cecilia's life began to take shape. Despite running all the way through the streets of Venice, they had arrived too late — no doubt Antonio had calculated it — and the procession, the very thing Cecilia had asked to see, had already gone by. The long white sailcloth canopy was in place, bisecting the narrow square like a spinal column, but the Doge and his retinue had passed beneath it and were shut up inside the plain brick-faced church of San Rocco, thanking the leper saint for stopping the plague of 1576.

As soon as she saw this, Cecilia knew Antonio had beaten her. She'd blackmailed him into bringing her to the celebration in San Rocco and from the start he had set out to make the day a disaster. He'd forced her to chase after him all the way from their house in Santa Maria de Formosa to the Campo San Rocco, racing down crowded alleyways, dodging around blind corners, vaulting over beggars and skidding over slippery bridges. Cecilia worried that the *sbirri* would arrest them for thieves but, as she skipped to avoid a one-legged veteran stretched out on the pavement, she realised she hadn't run like this, with her skirt hitched up and her shawl coming loose from her head, for years and years. It was good to be out of the house, good to be rushing down unfamiliar streets, following the gangly form of her brother who ran ahead of her, trying to lose her, laughing. "You can't keep up!" he shouted. "You can't catch me."

She caught him at the Campo San Rocco.

“What an awful shame,” Antonio said, gasping for air. He bent over, hands on his knees. She was glad to see he was out of breath from sprinting. “Let’s get the Doge to do it all again, just for us.” Before Cecilia could stop him, he mounted the church steps and made as if to knock on the church doors.

“Excuse me, Doge Cornaro,” Antonio called out. “Could you kindly come out again? Cecilia Guardi missed your first act.” One of the guards placed a hand on Antonio’s thin chest and pushed him casually back down into the crowd.

To hide her disappointment, Cecilia busied herself rearranging her shawl, folding it securely over her hair, tucking the ends into the waistband of her skirt. When she’d caught Antonio bending their maid, Maria, over the kitchen table, she’d known instantly that she had the power to claim any bribe she asked for, from him or from her: a new dress, a whole bag of cakes or even a boat trip to one of the islands. Instead she’d asked for this outing to the painting exhibition at San Rocco, thinking it was modest and justifiable, thinking it would mean something to Antonio and he would be genuinely happy to go with her. Now, as she glared at her brother, she wished she’d demanded more. But it was too late. She would have to salvage what she could of the day.

“So show me the paintings,” she said, attempting to sound commanding. At least Antonio was capable of doing that. “You can tell me something about them, can’t you? You’re a painter, or so they say.”

Antonio unbent to his full height and looked down at her. He was very tall and he towered over most people when he bothered to stand up straight, but not so much over Cecilia, who was tall herself. Unlike her, Antonio was also very thin, which meant that his height, instead of giving him stature, made him ridiculous. His dark hair, never well dressed, had come loose from its tie

during their run and strands straggled down the sides of his head. Cecilia had the impulse to turn her brother around right there in the square and fix his hair for him, the way she did for her younger brothers. But then she thought better of it.

He pulled a clown face, pushing his eyebrows up and his mouth down into a frown of mock surprise. “*Am I?* A painter, is that what they say?” He patted his pockets as though the proof might be found there. “Are you sure?”

He leapt off the steps of the church and loped away, threading through the crowd. Cecilia followed him, passing beneath the canopy and moving toward the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, the building that housed the Confraternity of San Rocco, a brotherhood of deep-pocketed Venetians who did charitable works. They sponsored the day’s events.

Approaching the Scuola, Cecilia tried to remember why the confraternity did that. It had to do with the great painter, Titian, and San Rocco, the leper saint, the one who had the adorable little dog. How did the story go? The famous painter’s death had moved San Rocco to bring an end to the plague epidemic in Venice. In some mysterious way this made him the patron saint of Venetian painters — or was it just painters with the plague? All Cecilia knew was that they had prayed to San Rocco when her father took ill, but it hadn’t done any good. Domenico Guardi died slowly, in agony. No saint, not even a diseased one, stepped in to help.

Cecilia hadn’t been allowed to go to the celebration in San Rocco or anywhere else since her father’s death. She was a little stunned by the crowds and the colour. The square was packed with people who had gathered to see the procession. Bright silk banners hung from surrounding balconies from which well-dressed ladies looked down, sipping iced drinks from fluted glasses. Vendors circulated, hawking cool drinks and nuts and nougat.

The beautiful façade of the Scuola, with its slender columns and discs of coloured marble, was decked for the occasion in garlands of fresh greenery and golden tassels, forming a colourful background for the main event: an outdoor exhibition of paintings by the city's best and most ambitious artists.

There were many paintings on show that day, more than Cecilia remembered from previous years. Framed canvases of all sizes and shapes, depicting all the main subjects — histories, portraits, views — were hung on the façade of the Scuola. The festival of San Rocco provided the only occasion for Venice's painters to display their works in public, so every studio and major artist in the city wanted to be represented there. Paintings dangled from the building's cornices and were suspended from the stone carvings of its capitals. The paintings hung at odd angles, lending the exhibition an air of spontaneity, as though passing painters had decided on a whim to put their best works up in the open air. The pictures looked both vulnerable and unnatural outdoors, with their surfaces raked by harsh sunlight, dampened by the rare drop of summer rain. As a child, Cecilia used to worry about them, but her father had reassured her that a well-crafted oil painting was as tough as ox hide.

Cecilia found Antonio waiting for her in front of a large painting of the Madonna and Child. He stood with his eyes closed as though meditating on deep subjects. "How you do dawdle," he scolded when he saw her there.

"Get on with it," was all she said.

Antonio cleared his throat. "Here is a painting," he said, waving his long arms like a conjurer, closing his eyes again.

Cecilia, suddenly hopeful, prepared herself for the pleasure of listening. Every year her father had carried her through the exhibition on his shoulders, positioning himself in front of each canvas in turn and telling her everything he knew about it: what

it meant, who had painted it and, most important of all, who had paid for it. She adored his stories about the figures in the paintings — gods, goddesses, kings, queens, saints, devils — and she loved hearing about the wealthy noblemen that commissioned the works. But the thing she loved most was the way so many people they knew, so many painters, were intimately connected to these celebrities. Ricci, Zanchi, Litterini, Strom, Diziani, Trevisiani, Visenti: her father had worked for many of them. He'd even worked on some of the paintings they saw at San Rocco. Cecilia remembered him standing her in front of a huge history painting and showing her the clump of yellow hollyhocks he'd painted with his own hands. She put out one finger and dared to touch the thick paint, experiencing an intense rush of pride.

Now she gazed up at the image of the Madonna and child, a handsome woman with a fat baby boy on her knee, and prepared herself to listen to Antonio. He assumed a solemn expression. "This painting is made primarily of — paint."

"You clown," Cecilia said. Once again it occurred to her that Antonio was not going to honour his part of their bargain. "That's not what you say."

"It's painted with an instrument called a — brush. Or so they tell me."

"Stop it. Stop it." Cecilia covered her ears. "You are such a fool."

But Antonio wasn't going to stop. He sidestepped along the line of paintings until he was standing under the next one. It was huge, the size of a shed, and it depicted Roman soldiers in shiny helmets and breastplates alongside a rearing mad-eyed horse with a curved neck, hooves lifted to strike. Her father would have told her everything about it: which pigments they used, how they had negotiated such an enormous canvas out of the studio doors. He'd even have been able to tell her the name of the horse.

"Here is another painting," Antonio said, drawling like a

pedant. "It's bigger, you'll notice, and has more paint in it. I can see a quantity of blue paint, with touches of green. And, I'll be, there's some red."

Cecilia decided to try ignoring him and moved on quickly to the next work. She didn't need Antonio. She knew enough about painting and painters to tell herself stories. She placed herself defiantly beneath a painting showing an angel kneeling beside an old man in a loose robe. Both figures were bathed in a liquid shaft of golden light that shone through a barred window. Was it Saint Peter, Paul? Or maybe a more recent saint?

Antonio bounded over, officious, assiduous. "Don't get ahead of me!" he cried. "If you rush you won't get the full benefit."

"Go away," Cecilia said.

Antonio pretended to study the painting. "It appears to me, if I'm not mistaken and I rarely am, based on my long years of experience, that what we have here is yet another glaring example of paintiness and the use of so-called brushes." He turned then and scanned the square in a sort of panic. "My God!" he cried, pointing to the paintings displayed on the other side of the square against the railings of the Frari. "These painted things are all over the place. Who do you suppose left them here?"

Cecilia scowled, pulling her frayed shawl around her face to hide her fury. Antonio dropped his act. "It's not working out for you today, is it little sister? I told you it's no good trying to get one over on your big brother. And by the way, how can you tell Mama about *me* now that I know about *you*?"

"I haven't done anything." She had a bad feeling about the direction the conversation was taking. "Not like you. And Maria."

"Oh no? If I remember rightly Mama forbade you to leave the house without her. There was talk of convents, if I recall. Of shipping off to. I hate to think what will happen when Mama finds out how you made me bring you here against my will."

She saw at once that Antonio was right. He'd trapped her. She couldn't hurt him now without hurting herself even more. To her shame, tears started up in Cecilia's eyes. She retreated deeper into her shawl to conceal them, but Antonio noticed.

Looking far away across the tops of the heads of people in the square he said, "And now she's going to cry."

"What do you know?" she shouted at him, ignoring the crowds of people around them. "Mother will kill me when she finds me missing or she'll kill herself. And all for nothing because you're too mean to do one nice thing even when I *force* you to do it." The injustice overwhelmed her and her reproach dissolved into a sob. Antonio pulled her into a nearby alley, away from the crowd.

"Come on now," he said, continuing to look at the far distance, as though hoping to be rescued. "I was just fooling around."

"You don't know what it's like," Cecilia wailed. "I'm a prisoner in that house. And the first chance she gets, she really will put me in a convent."

"She's not going to put you in a convent," Antonio soothed. "No convent would have you. You're too awful." He fished a dirty studio rag from his pocket and gave it to her. The turpentine on it stung Cecilia's nose but brought her to her senses. "The fact is she doesn't have the money to put you in a convent. And who would look after Nicolò and Francesco? They'd turn into pick-pockets just like that."

"What about your girlfriend Maria?" Cecilia thought of the servant's attitude the day she had caught them together in the kitchen. Maria lay back over the kitchen table with the same dull, patient expression she used when she waited for water to boil. Obviously, this had happened before.

A look of disgust or shame passed across her brother's face. It made Cecilia think of her youngest brother, Nicolò, who was four. He and Antonio shared the same dark eyes and hair, the

same delicate blade of a nose and a certain fastidiousness that was hidden most of the time. Cecilia realised that Antonio, at nineteen, was still a boy. He was just sixteen when their father died. Then, everyone said that becoming the head of the family would force him to grow up. It hadn't. He was the same Antonio Cecilia had known all her life: a joker, a slipper-away, reliably lazy and evasive. But she loved him; she loved him because she couldn't help it.

"Show me something anyway," she said, resigned to disappointment. "Anything at all. Then we're quits. I'll find a way to deal with Mama."

Antonio thought briefly. "There's only one really interesting picture here," he said. "But it makes me want to throw myself in a canal."

"Perfect," she said. "Take me to it."

The painting had a little crowd of six or seven people standing beneath it. It was a long, horizontal canvas in a gilded wooden frame. Its supporting string was hooked onto a stone leaf on the façade of the Scuola and it hung at a slight tilt.

There was no need this time for anyone to explain the subject to Cecilia: she recognised it easily. In the foreground of the painting a bearded man stood on a dark promontory clutching a pair of small stone tablets to his chest. Behind him, a group of frightened people huddled and below him stretched an expanse of dark green sea with a wide road cut straight down the middle. Down this pale sea-road came a golden chariot driven by a man in a plumed headdress and, after him, their spears thick as reeds on the seabed, marched an army of soldiers.

Cecilia responded at once to the neatness of the visual conceit, the straightforward strategy of the painting. From the first glance,

she knew exactly what she was looking at: the moment just before Moses wipes out the Egyptian army by drowning them in the Red Sea. More than that, the artist had approached the painting in an interesting way. The scene was set in a moment of quiet, a pause just preceding the cataclysm. On the promontory Moses gripped his tablets and pointed at the sky with his free hand, cueing his righteous God. When the hand came down, the sea walls would snap shut and all the Egyptians would die.

With her eyes darting back and forth between Moses' hand and the walls of water, Cecilia held her breath in sweet anticipation of a disaster. None of the Egyptians — not the king in his chariot, nor his thousands of soldiers, not even the horses — seemed to notice the fatal blue-green walls trembling on either side, yet Cecilia, a helpless onlooker, could hardly look away from them.

From somewhere in her memory, Cecilia found the name of the man her father had thought was the best painter of their age. "Who *did* this? Piazzetta?"

Antonio laughed. "If only. At least Piazzetta is someone. You're never going to believe who's responsible for this..." He waved his hands at the painting as if shooing away a cloud of flies. "... production".

She turned to her brother with a sudden, irresistible surge of hope. "Was it you? Did you paint it?"

Antonio opened his mouth then closed it again. His eyes swept off into the distance and she thought she saw him blush. "Yes," he said evenly. "Yes, I did. Can't you tell?"

"Oh, but it's *good!*" She turned to the canvas, delighted. "The perspective works perfectly, the figures are all the right size. The glazes — when did you learn to do glazes that well?"

"I could always do them," Antonio said. "I just didn't feel like it."

"You didn't feel like it!" she said. "But now you see what a dif-

ference it makes when you just try, like Papa always said. Just look at the depth you managed to get out of that swipe of viridian layered over the underpainting. And the deep red of Moses' robe and the angels — the angels are drawn perfectly, with those little dabs of lead white popping out on their wings." Her admiring eyes fell on a notice stuck to the corner of the frame. "And, what's this? Can it be? It's been commended! Oh, Antonio!"

Now she forgave him everything. She threw her arms around him and hugged his bony ribcage. Her mother wouldn't care about her sneaking out once she found out about the commendation. Antonio's success was the best thing that could have happened to them all. It meant the family might just survive.

"But we have to go and tell Mama at once," she cried. "She'll be so happy. I'll go and get her and we can show her and..." With her ear to Antonio's chest, she could feel his ribcage resonating. He was laughing. She pushed him away.

"You should see your little face," he said. "It's precious."

This is the face of a murderous sister, she thought, feeling the anger boil up again in her chest. This is the face of the girl just before she attacks her idiot brother with a brick. "I'm going to murder you, Antonio," she said in a low voice.

But before she could attack him, someone else did it for her. From nowhere, a pair of strong male arms appeared and locked themselves around Antonio's neck. The assailant, dressed in a black tricorne hat and a stiff blue frock coat, mounted on her brother's back and rode him as Antonio staggered from one side to the other, trying to shake him off. Shorter than Antonio, the man's big feet dangled above the flagstones, his heels dug into her brother's calves as Antonio flailed beneath him. Cecilia debated whether to put out a foot and trip Antonio so the other man could kill him quicker. Before she could decide, the struggle ended and the two men stood panting and grinning at one another.

“You see? You see?” The short one pointed a finger at Antonio. “I’m too quick for you, Guardi. I told you I’d get you.”

“Tiepolo,” Antonio said, rubbing his throat. “I will, one day, when you least expect it, find you and slam those stumpy little fingers of yours in the nearest door.”

“And then I will have to paint better than you with my teeth. Ha ha!” Tiepolo turned to Cecilia. He swept off his hat and made a little bow. “Your servant,” he said. His manners were very correct.

“Oh, very smooth,” said Antonio, rubbing the tendons in his neck. “I see they sent you to dancing school too.”

“Your servant.” Cecilia raised herself to her full height and studied the young man from beneath half-closed eyelids, bringing him into focus through her lashes. His eyes were very large and dark brown. His nose had been broken and sat at a slight angle to the rest of his face, giving it a cock-eyed dynamism. He didn’t look like a street thug, much. He looked familiar.

A memory flashed through her mind: a red wall with a picture scratched on it in chalk, a scurrilous caricature of a potbellied dwarf with a big nose and scars from the pox. The *sbirri* rushing up and grabbing the boy artist, a bandy-legged urchin in ragged clothing, before he could run away.

“I know you.” Cecilia was genuinely surprised. “You’re the boy they caught drawing pictures on the walls of the Arsenal. They dragged you off. I was there.”

Tiepolo’s big eyes widened still further. “You’ve uncovered my dark secret, Signorina. It was me.”

“Remind me, were they pictures of some senator or someone like that? I was very young, but I remember they were funny.”

“They were pictures of our landlord. Unfortunately he didn’t find them so amusing.” Tiepolo smiled at her, a lopsided, comical smile that made him look like a little boy. It was also a watchful smile, full of intelligence.

“Oh dear. Did they thrash you? We all thought they must have killed you.”

“They did something much worse: they apprenticed me to Lazzarini. Lazzarini was the same painter Antonio had trained with.

“That’s strange,” she said. “I was around that studio a lot and I don’t remember seeing you there.”

“That’s because Tiepolo is so tiny,” Antonio said in a hoarse voice. “He used to fall through the cracks in the floorboards.”

She watched Tiepolo put his hat back on. Could this really be the same person she had seen dragged away? The boy she remembered was runty, starved. He wore a cut-down man’s shirt and shoes that were held together with string — or possibly made of string alone, wound through filthy toes. The clothes Tiepolo had on today were expensive and so new they looked as if they could have been stolen. His square-toed shoes were good quality and had fine silver buckles. None of this fit with her memories and yet — Cecilia looked more closely and saw with some relief that Tiepolo’s shoes were splattered all over with fine drops of paint. His hands, too, were covered with it: paint rimmed his cuticles and filled the fine parenthetic creases of his bony knuckles. The pigments were identical to the ones on the prizewinning painting: burnt umber, green earth, lead white, viridian.

She had a sudden vision of Tiepolo slapping the last strokes on the canvas right there on the campo, then hitching it onto the wall of the Scuola still glistening with wet paint. Yes, she thought to herself, the brave, clever, dragged-away boy would be capable of such a stunt. His talent was flagrantly evident when he was only ten and now he was responsible for those trembling, deadly walls of sea and those merciless, sublime angels. It gave Cecilia a strange feeling to find him again, still living, still painting. She realised he’d always been a sort of hero for her, a blood sacrifice to art.

Tiepolo had dragged his eyes away from her. He was asking Antonio about work.

“If I remember rightly,” Tiepolo said in a friendly way, “you were painting sets at the opera. How is that going?”

Antonio shrugged. His long frame seemed to sway in the light breeze. Everything about Antonio looked flimsy next to Tiepolo. Her brother’s face was framed against the turbulent colours of Tiepolo’s painting, defining his features, making him look paler and less substantial than usual. Poor Antonio, thought Cecilia. “It’s all architecture. Not hard if you can draw a straight line.”

“So, can you?” Tiepolo grinned at Cecilia to show he was kidding. She wondered if Tiepolo were baiting her brother on purpose, then decided he wasn’t. He seemed confident, maybe cocky. Probably it was impossible for him to imagine the life of a painter with less talent than he had. But a look of anger passed across Antonio’s features like a cloud. Cecilia wondered what his history was with this Tiepolo. Were they friends? Enemies?

Tiepolo seemed to sense he’d blundered and changed the subject. He reached out with one hand and nudged the frame of his painting until it hung dead level. “I wanted to say that I thought it was harsh of Ricci to throw you out like that. He’s getting old. He doesn’t have the patience to look into things properly.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Antonio said too quickly. Cecilia noticed his eyes flick in her direction.

Tiepolo, not noticing, sailed on. “I don’t know if anyone ever bothered to tell you, but they found the packet of ultramarine in the end. Some fool assistant just put it in the wrong jar. Typical.”

“Typical.” Antonio clearly wanted to silence him. But he didn’t need to worry. Cecilia and her mother had already guessed that he’d lost his place at Sebastiano Ricci’s studio some months before. The regular money he brought in simply stopped coming and was replaced by sporadic donations, a few coins dumped

from time to time on the kitchen table. No one had dared to ask him why. Her mother had stepped up her campaign of begging letters to their rich uncle in Vienna and Cecilia arranged for a neighbour to buy the next-to-last piece of decent furniture, a carved armoire left over from the old days when they were merely poor, not yet destitute.

This thought made Cecilia feel that she should leave the Campo San Rocco at once and get home as fast as possible. When she was at home in the dirty little house near Santa Maria Formosa, she longed to be away; now that she was away, she panicked to think she wasn't at home. She tugged at Antonio's sleeve, intending to ask him to take her back immediately. But just then there was a stir in the square as the doors of the church opened and the nobility began filing out.

First came a group of men in mauve robes wearing long, curly white wigs. As they descended the church steps and moved beneath the canopy, the luminous, nautical shade turned their robes the colour of bruised plums. Next out of the church doors came a man in a black gown carrying the Doge's gilded stool, then another clutching his embroidered cushion. The Doge, Cornaro, came next, in pursuit of his cushion and stool. He was wearing his white satin cloak and his little golden cap shaped like a badly baked muffin. He was followed by a group of men whose crisp black tunics showed off the gold of their many ornaments — these were members of the confraternity, walking with a bit of swagger at the event they organised and paid for. Drawing up the rear came a covey of old men in red robes and white wigs, the foreign ambassadors.

"They all look so hot," was all Cecilia could think to say. She was close enough to see the sweat beading the men's faces as they drifted out of the church in waves, less a procession than the exodus of a sleepy congregation from church. The robed dig-

nitaries travelled only a few feet under the white canopy before dispersing sideways into the crowd. There was no form to it, no magic at all. Cecilia felt the shadow of disappointment. Perhaps processions were for children and not, now, for her.

“Take me home,” she said, turning to Antonio. Evening was coming and she was already thinking of the reception her mother was bound to give her. But as she spoke, Cecilia saw the Doge break away from his retinue. He came hurrying over to where she and Antonio were standing, waving one arm like a man flagging down a gondola.

“There you are! There you are!” Cornaro bellowed. “You’re just the man I was hoping to see.” For one thrilling second, Cecilia imagined he was coming after Antonio. But it was Tiepolo he sought.

The young painter performed a neat bow as the most important public servant in Venice approached him. He looked unsurprised when the Doge took him by the elbow and began to speak to him confidentially, engulfing the lower part of Tiepolo’s body in his wide ceremonial robes.

“Wouldn’t you know it?” Antonio muttered near her ear. “There’s no stopping some people, even when they are too short.”

Cecilia wanted to stay to find out what the Doge had to say to Tiepolo. The chief of the city was standing so close to her that she could distinguish the individual threads of embroidery on his cloak, each silken fibre wrapped in minute spirals of gold wire. He smelled powerfully of frankincense from the church. His jowls, falling from a strong chin, wobbled as he spoke. Cecilia saw Tiepolo look up, his dark eyes searching over the Doge’s ermine-draped shoulder until he found her face in the crowd. He raised his hand. *Wait*. She thought she saw him mouth the word.

But Antonio was in no mood to wait. “It’s time to go,” he said, taking her arm and steering her away.

“Hold on,” she said. “I’m not done looking.”

“You’re not done flirting. Oh, Tiepolo, your painting is so wonderful,” he mocked. “Oh, Tiepolo, you’re already working for the Doge. You wanted to go. Now we’re going.” Antonio pulled her along almost violently.

“I was just being polite to your friend. You’re hurting me!”

“Tiepolo is a dwarf, a hunchback and a social climber. And too lucky for his own good.” There was spite in Antonio’s voice.

She glanced back at Tiepolo to see if what her brother said was true and caught a glimpse of the young painter, the lower half of his body engulfed by the Doge’s voluminous robes. The torsos of the two men seemed to rise from the same golden mountain. Tiepolo’s back, as far as she could tell, was straight.

Antonio released her. “Anyway” he said, “I have to meet someone in San Moisé, near the theatre.” They were now standing in an alley that ran alongside the Scuola, leading away from the Campo San Rocco.

Cecilia adjusted her shawl, sealing herself safely in. “But you’ll take me back home first.” It was a demand rather than a question.

“Afterwards,” Antonio said airily, turning and striding away down the narrow street.

“But the sun’s going down.”

“We have plenty of time. You won’t want to miss this.”

Cecilia imagined herself heading home alone. Antonio was already halfway down the alley, his narrow, dark head standing proud above the crowd. It struck her that she had spent her whole life running after him. From the moment she was able to toddle, she had chased Antonio’s thin back toward trouble. For this, she was always grateful to him. Without a little trouble, life was so very boring.