

## THE RENAISSANCE CLUB by Rachel Dacus EXCERPT

A distant clang. The Swiss Guards were closing the outer doors and tourists were scurrying. Where was The Renaissance Club? In a panic, May dashed toward the *Baldacchino* as a man stepped out from behind a pillar. She stopped short.

“Sorry!” she said, backing up.

“*Signorina*, watch where you’re going!” The young man in black frowned and didn’t apologize. With his long, dark hair and white sleeves rolled up on muscular forearms, he looked like an art restorer. A black jacket was draped over his shoulders. He held a long wooden measuring rod, the kind used by architects centuries ago. Maybe he was rehearsing for some sort of pageant.

“Ladies are not allowed here while I’m working,” he said stiffly. He aimed the rod at the nearest column and sighted up along it.

“I know you!” she exclaimed. She knew him well.

He straightened his jacket and bowed. “Everyone in Rome knows *Cavaliere* Bernini. But you may not be here. I need silence. I have a very big work to complete.”

His finger pointed up at the four twisted bronze columns, where May was astonished to see no bronze canopy on top. Tons of bronze had simply vanished. She looked back at him. Bernini lifted the instrument and peered up at the nearest column. Her living, breathing idol moved to one side to get a better angle. Lean and strong, he was even more handsome than in his self-portrait.

Now he was so intent on his investigation that he seemed unaware of her and the fact that her pulse was pounding. How had she come here, and where exactly was she?

He lowered the measuring rod, framed the air with his hands, and used his fingers to make rapid computations. He stared at her so intensely that she shivered. She remembered that searing gaze in his self-portrait.

“You’re disturbing me, *signorina*.” He turned away, clearly expecting her to leave.

How could she possibly move? It was her genius. His dark eyes and curly hair seemed to materialize the energy of the brilliant mind. Prominent cheekbones gave his face a Neapolitan look.

While she watched, he made a few quick calculations and looked at her again. His eyes narrowed.

“I won’t say a word,” she promised.

Bernini wasn’t much taller than she was, but he made every inch of the difference count. May stared back, as defiantly as she could. How many times had she had imagined those arms pulling her close? She asserted herself silently. She was his historian, and historians didn’t blink. Though most never met their subjects face-to-face.

He turned away again—did that mean she could stay? A sharp, unpleasant odor assailed her nose—definitely the smell of piss, coming from a large nearby urn. His century might have towering beauty, but it had no indoor plumbing. Artists working here had to improvise. They also used urine to give a patina to metal sculpture. Despite the smell, she wanted to stay. She tried not to move, but he sensed her watching and was irritated.

“*Signorina*, please. I cannot concentrate. Do you not have something else to do?”

His arrogance was true to his time, an era when powerful men rudely flaunted their status. Bernini’s fame, even at his young age, was second only to the cardinals and popes he served.

“I thought the church was open today,” she said.

“It is not open to you, unless you are applying to become my assistant. But you will not be any use to me in that long skirt.”

She looked down. She had acquired voluminous folds of blue silk, a dress she hadn’t been wearing before. She felt air on her shoulders—her dropped-sleeves left them bare. “Well, not in this I wouldn’t,” she said, appreciating the rustle and texture. “But I’m not applying. I just want to watch you work.”

He said more gently, “Are you a traveler? You do not look Roman.”

“Yes. I’m a traveler. From a long way away. I’m with a group touring Rome. It’s our first day. St. Peter’s is so gorgeous, I can’t believe it. The *Baldacchino* is one of your finest pieces.”

Ignoring the compliment, he said, “If you are a traveler, then please travel to some other masterpiece. This church has many.” He waved her away and picked up the rod, checking the column once more.

Music was playing in the distance. She didn’t remember hearing it before and wondered if they were preparing for a pageant. “I can’t go. I need to study your

*Baldacchino*, especially at this stage." Again, she considered his arms and their strength. She pushed the thought aside.

He lowered the rod and at last, smiled. Historians had written that his smile could charm anyone, but he had never been painted smiling. What a shame.

"Why are you, a woman, studying my art?" His voice wasn't deep but it was vibrant, with an Italian lilt. "Women only study languages, lute playing, babies, and needle work."

"I'm a different kind of woman." She remembered what a range of women he had known, from models to noblemen's wives. In his era, women's decent occupations could be listed in five lines.

"I do not wish to be rude, but because of your sex you cannot study art."

"I'm an exception." She enjoyed the way that startled him.

"What are you called?" he demanded.

"My name is May Gold."

He bowed. "*Signorina* May Gold, *Cavaliere* Bernini is at your service! Your golden skin makes me think you are perhaps from Egypt, where women aren't properly schooled in manners."

She smiled at what he thought would be an insult. "I'm half Italian and half Jewish. And I *am* a student of your work, despite my sex."

"How can that be?"

His superior certainty made the sarcasm pinch, but she knew he couldn't easily understand. She might as well tell him what he would find unbelievable. "I'm a historian studying Baroque art, and you're the focus of my study."

He laughed loudly. "A woman historian? Impossible! And I know nothing of your Baroque. I am merely—" he bowed insincerely—"a genius of sculpture and architecture."

"You invented the style called Baroque, and I know all about your art."

"If you know so much, define for me the Golden Section!"

He was so sure of himself, but she was sure too. She answered, "The Golden Section is the division of a unit of length in two, so that the ratio of the shorter part to the longer part equals the ratio of the longer to the whole."

He stared. Suddenly, he laughed uproariously. "Nicely recited! I cannot imagine what strange country you have come from."

He walked around her and she caught his scent, a mingling of wine, lavender, and sweat. Sniffing her too, he said, "You have no smell and your clothes are clean. You know the Golden Section. You can become my biographer."

"Yes, I will be."

"Good! *Signorina* May, your being a woman makes it much more interesting."

His glance swept up and down, as if she were a block of marble to be tackled.

"Well? Do I pass inspection?"

He didn't answer, but he took a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. It was covered with sketches of faces. He took out a stump of charcoal and began to draw. She imagined her face emerging among the other faces. She pulled herself up, aware that her breathing was short, and that it was evident, given her low-cut neckline.

"You're sketching me?"

His glances hurried back and forth. "I see shapes everywhere. You have some good ones. I want to capture them."

Her portrait, drawn by Bernini! Her curly hair captured by his rhythmic lines, the waves and flowing forms he always put into his art.

"Your beauty is interrupted by your brows, which are too thick," he observed.

Standards of beauty were different in his century. She remembered the delicate eyebrows on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, giving her an ethereal grace echoed in all of Botticelli's models. Such fine eyebrows must be rare.

"You must see lots of heavy eyebrows," she said.

"Yes, they are common in Rome," he said. "For a long nose, yours is very fine."

With a definitive stroke, he finished. He held up the sketch.

She beheld her image as drawn by her favorite artist. Delighted, she said, "It's beautiful! But you made me look so serious."

"You are serious. Your face has important flaws, and they combine to suggest a deeper truth of your spirit."

He had echoed her eyebrow's arch in the curves of her braid, and repeated those curves in her lips and shoulders. In his sketch, she was something between ethereal and sensuous, as well as idealized.

"You have pleased Bernini with your well-shaped eye," he said. "Now go and use it to study another artist." He folded up the paper and tucked it into his shirt.

"I'll go when I'm ready," she said.

This made him laugh. "Strange woman, are you a creature of this world or another?"

"I'm as much of this world as you," she said.

"Then what in this world are you?"

She found in her hand a painted fan. She lifted it to her mouth and murmured from behind it, "How gentle the face of grief, as she gazes on her sacrificed son. How luminous what rises from their sorrow."

"Ah! You are a poet and you have written about *The Pieta*."

"My lines are only trying to be poetry."

"You must not say 'only trying'! My father taught me to never disparage good work. Those lines of yours take flight." He gestured upwards. "So take proper credit."

"I do," she said.

"You do not. I hear your hesitation. You must recognize the good in your work, because there will be many who will criticize it. Say after me, 'These lines of mine are very good.'"

She was embarrassed, but she repeated, "These lines of mine are very good." She wished she hadn't lowered her eyes, her gaze fixed on her satin toes.

"Say it again. With meaning."

Raising her eyes, she said, "These lines of mine are very good! But how do I know?"

"Because Bernini tells you! I am a poet. I write poetry in my plays."

"I've read one! And I know about your stage machines, and how you could make them simulate floods and fires."

"So you have indeed studied me."

At that moment, a deferential man in a long smock came up to him, bowed, and spoke so quietly she couldn't hear. Bernini nodded and the man left.

"My newest assistant," he explained. "A talented man named Bonarelli. He carves very well and obeys like a spaniel. His little wife helps with menial tasks in the studio."

Costanza's husband, spouse to the "little wife" who would become Bernini's great love. May had the urge to warn him against employing this Bonarelli, but she couldn't explain. She couldn't foretell the havoc that would be caused by Bonarelli's little wife.

"How did you become a poet?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to answer and a tiny butterfly flew out. The creature danced a pale gold figure in the air between them.

Bernini watched it carefully. "Poet," he said. "A poet must have feeling. And many butterflies."

"My butterflies are usually encased in stone."

He shook his head. "Perhaps Giorgio sent you here to carve them free."

"You know George St. James?"

"Of course. We drink together. When I drink, which is seldom."

"Do you often talk with George's visitors?"

He moved closer. "Giorgio's visitors often come, but none with such beautiful hair."

Deftly, he undid her braid and spread the strands over her bare shoulders. She caught her breath. He heard her small gasp and smiled, playing with the curls.

His fingers brushed her skin, raising little zings of warmth, but she moved her shoulder to push his hand away. "What makes you think you can touch me?"

"I wish to," he said. He touched her neck, her collarbone, and her cheek.

Now her feelings weren't encased in stone, though her dignity was a little insulted.

Taking her hand, he said, "Here." He turned it over, put something in her palm, and closed her fingers.

She looked down. "A gold coin?"

"To buy you an even more beautiful dress, one to set off your good shapes and help you find your feelings."

May laughed at being so exquisitely dismissed.

"I will make a bargain," he said, holding her fingers around the coin. "Say nothing to Giorgio of this encounter and this pact. Do you agree?"

She nodded, wishing he wouldn't let go.

"Now you may go." He turned back to his work

She backed slowly away.

"Are you still here?" he said over his shoulder.

"No, I'm gone."

*I'm gone out of time and maybe out of my mind. How can I come back here? I must leap*

*again through the shimmering doorway.*