



A NOVEL

*THE
MASTERPIECE*

FRANCINE
RIVERS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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The Masterpiece

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1

ROMAN VELASCO CLIMBED the fire escape and swung over the wall onto the flat roof. Crouching, he moved quickly. Another building abutted the five-story apartment house, the perfect location for graffiti. Right across the street was a bank building, and he'd already left a piece on the front door.

Shrugging off his backpack, he pulled out his supplies. He'd have to work fast. Los Angeles never slept. Even at three in the morning, cars sped along the boulevard.

This piece would be seen by anyone driving east. He'd be at risk until he finished, but dressed in black pants and a hooded sweat-shirt, he'd be hard to spot, unless someone were looking for him. Ten minutes. That's all he needed to leave a parade of characters dancing on the wall—all looking like the top-hatted businessman from the Monopoly game, the last one leaping toward the street. He'd stenciled the figure laden with money bags going into the bank across the street.

The paper stencil hooked on something and tore. Swearing under his breath, Roman worked quickly to tape it. A wind came up, pulling a portion away. It was a long stencil and took precious minutes to secure. He grabbed a can of spray paint and shook it. When he pressed the button, nothing happened. Cursing, he pulled out another can and started spraying.

A vehicle approached. He glanced down and froze when he spotted a police car decelerating. Was it the same one that had come by an hour ago, when he'd been heading for the bank? He'd walked with purpose, hoping they'd think he was just some guy heading home from a night shift. The car had slowed, checking him out, and then moved on. As soon as it disappeared down the street, he'd done the work on the glass door of the bank building.

Roman went back to work. He only needed a few more minutes. He kept spraying.

Brake lights glowed hot red on the street. The police car had stopped in front of the bank. A white beam of light fixed on the front door.

One more minute. Roman made two more sweeps and started the careful removal of the stencil. He'd had to use more tape than usual, so it took longer. The last section of paper peeled away, and he added three small black interlocking letters that looked like a bird in flight.

One officer was out of the car, flashlight in hand.

Roman crouched low, rolled the stencil, and stuffed it into his backpack with the spray cans. The beam of light rose and moved closer. It flashed right over him as he started moving across the roof. It traveled down and away. Relieved, Roman shouldered the pack and rose slightly.

The light returned, silhouetting him against the wall. He bolted, face averted.

The beam of light tracked his escape across the roof. He heard voices and racing feet. Heart hammering, Roman took a flying leap onto the next building. He hit hard, rolled to his feet, and kept going. The police department probably had a file on the Bird's work. He wasn't a teenager anymore, facing community service for doing gang tagging on a wall. If he got caught now, he'd do jail time.

Worse, he'd destroy the budding reputation Roman Velasco was earning as a legitimate artist. Graffiti earned street cred, but didn't help in a gallery.

One officer had returned to the squad car. Tires squealed. They weren't giving up.

Roman spotted an open window a couple of buildings over and decided to climb up rather than down.

A car door slammed. A man shouted. Must be a slow night if these two cops wanted to spend this much time hunting a graffiti artist.

Roman swung over the edge of another roof. A half-empty can of spray paint fell out of his jostled pack and exploded on the pavement below.

The startled officer drew his gun and pointed it at Roman as he climbed. "LAPD! Stop where you are!"

Gripping a ledge, Roman pulled himself up and went in through the open apartment window. He held his breath. A man snored in the bedroom. Roman crept forward. He hadn't gone two steps before bumping into something. His eyes adjusted to the dim light from the kitchen appliances. The occupant must be a hoarder. The cluttered living room could be Roman's undoing. He left his backpack behind the sofa.

Opening the front door quietly, he peered out and listened. No movement, no voices. The man in the bedroom snorted and stirred. Roman slipped out quickly and closed the door behind him. The emergency exit door was stuck. If he forced it, he'd make noise. He found the elevator, his heart pounding faster as it took its sweet time rising. *Bing*. The doors opened. Roman stepped inside and punched the button for the underground parking garage.

Just stay cool. He shoved the hood back and raked his hands through his hair. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The elevator doors opened. The basement parking lot was well lit. Roman held the door open and waited a few seconds to scope the area before he stepped out. All clear. Relieved, he headed for the ramp leading up to the side street.

The police car sat at the curb. Doors opened, and both officers emerged.

For a split second, Roman debated inventing a quick story for why he'd be heading out for a walk at three thirty in the morning, but somehow he knew no story was going to keep him out of cuffs.

He bolted up the street toward a residential neighborhood a block off the main boulevard. The officers followed like hounds after a fox.

Roman went down one street, along a paved driveway, and over a wall. He thought he was home free until he realized he wasn't alone in the backyard. A German shepherd leaped to its feet and gave chase. Roman raced across the yard and over the back fence. The dog hit the fence and clawed at it, barking fiercely. Roman landed hard on the other side and knocked over a couple of garbage cans in his haste to get away. Now every other canine up and down the street was sounding the alarm. Roman moved fast, keeping low and in the shadows.

Lights went on. He could hear voices.

Inquiries would slow down the cops, and they'd be less likely to go over fences and trespass. Roman moved fast for a few blocks and then slowed to a normal gait to catch his breath.

The dogs had stopped barking. He heard a car and slipped behind a privet hedge. The police car crossed the next street, not slowing as it headed back toward Santa Monica Boulevard. Maybe he'd lost them. Rather than push his luck any further, Roman waited another few minutes before venturing out to the sidewalk.

It took him an hour to make his way back to his BMW. Sliding into the driver's seat, he couldn't resist driving east to check out his work.

The bank would have its front door cleaned by noon, but the high piece on the wall across the street would last longer. The Bird had gained enough notoriety over the past few years that some building owners left the graffiti untouched. He hoped that would be the case with this one. He'd come too close to getting caught to have the work buffed and forgotten in a day or two.

Freeway traffic had already picked up. Fighting exhaustion, Roman turned on the air-conditioning. Cold air blasted him, keeping him

wide-awake as he drove up into Topanga Canyon, feeling drained and vaguely depressed. He should be reveling after his successful night raid, not feeling like an old man in need of a recliner.

He slowed and turned onto the gravel drive down to his house. The push of a button opened the garage door. Three more cars bigger than his 740Li could fit in the space. He shut off the engine and sat for a few seconds as the door whirred closed behind him.

As he started to get out of his car, a wave of weakness hit him. He sat still for a minute, waiting for the odd sensation to pass. It hit him again when he headed for the back door. Staggering, he went down on one knee. He anchored his fist on the concrete and kept his head down.

The spell passed, and Roman stood slowly. He needed sleep. That's all. One full night would fix him up. He opened the back door to dead silence.

Unzipping and removing the black hoodie, he headed down the hallway to his bedroom. He was too tired to take a shower, too tired to turn the air conditioner down to sixty-five, too tired to eat, though his stomach cramped with hunger. Stripping off his clothes, he sprawled across the unmade bed. Maybe he'd get lucky tonight and sleep without dreaming. Usually, the high he got from one of his night raids earned a payback of nightmares from his days in the Tenderloin. White Boy never stayed buried for long.

Morning shot spears of sunlight. Roman closed his eyes, craving darkness.



Grace Moore got up early, knowing she would need plenty of time to cross the valley and arrive on time for her first day as a temp worker. She wasn't sure the job would pay well enough to get a small apartment for herself and her son, Samuel, but it was a start. The longer she lived with the Garcias, the more complicated things became.

Selah and Ruben were in no hurry for her to leave. Selah still hoped Grace would change her mind and sign the adoption papers. Grace didn't want to give Selah false hope, but she had nowhere else to go. Every day that passed increased her desire to be independent again.

She'd sent out dozens of résumés since being laid off over a year ago and only received a few calls back for interviews. None had produced a job. Every employer wanted a college graduate these days, and she'd only completed a year and a half before putting her education on hold so she could support her husband, Patrick, until he graduated.

Looking back, she wondered if Patrick had ever loved her. Every promise Patrick had made, he'd broken. He had needed her. He had used her. It was that simple.

Aunt Elizabeth was right. She was a fool.

Samuel stirred in his crib. Grace lifted him gently, thankful he was awake. She'd have time to nurse him and change his diaper before handing him over to Selah. "Good morning, little man." Grace breathed in his baby scent and sat on the edge of the twin bed she'd just made. She opened her blouse and shifted him so he could nurse.

The circumstances of his conception and the complications he'd added to her life ceased to matter the moment she first held him in her arms. He hadn't been an hour old before she knew she couldn't give him up for adoption, no matter how much better his life might be with the Garcias. She'd told Selah and Ruben as much, but every day brought its own anguish as Selah took over his care while Grace went out looking for a way to support herself and her son.

Others do it, Lord. Why can't I?

Others had family. She had only Aunt Elizabeth.

Father, please let this job work out. Help me, Lord. Please. I know I don't deserve it, but I'm asking. I'm begging.

Thankfully, she'd passed the interview and tests with the temp agency and been added to their list. Mrs. Sandoval had a job opening.

“I’ve sent this man four highly qualified people, and he rejected every one. I don’t think he knows what he needs. It’s the only work I can offer you right now.”

Grace would have agreed to work for the devil himself if it meant a regular paycheck.



The sound of chimes pulled Roman up out of the darkness. Had he dreamed he was in Westminster Abbey? He rolled over. His body had just relaxed when the chimes started again. Someone had pushed the doorbell. He’d like to get his hands on the owner who installed the blasted system. Cursing, Roman pulled a pillow over his head, hoping to muffle the song that could be heard from one end of the five-thousand-square-foot house to the other.

Silence returned. The interloper had probably gotten the message and left.

Roman tried to go back to sleep. When the chimes started again, he shouted in frustration and stood up. A wave of weakness surged again. Knocking over a half-empty bottle of water and the alarm clock, he caught himself before he pitched face-first onto the floor. Three times in less than twenty-four hours. He might have to resort to prescription drugs to get the rest he needed. But right now, all he wanted to do was unleash his temper on the intruder who was ringing his bell.

Pulling on sweats, Roman grabbed a wrinkled T-shirt off the carpet and headed barefoot down the hall. Whoever stood on the other side of his front door was going to wish they’d never set foot on his property. The chimes started in again just as he yanked open the door. A young woman glanced up in surprise and then backed away when he stepped over the threshold.

“Can’t you read?” He jabbed a finger at the sign posted next to the front door. “No solicitors!”

Brown eyes wide, she put her hands up in a conciliatory gesture.

Her dark, curly hair was cropped short, and her black blazer, white blouse, and pearls screamed office worker. A faint recollection flickered in his mind, but Roman dismissed it. "Get lost!" He stepped back and slammed the door. He hadn't gotten far when she knocked lightly. Yanking the door open again, he glared at her. "What is wrong with you?"

She looked scared enough to run, but stood her ground. "I'm here on your orders, Mr. Velasco."

His orders? "Like I want a woman on my doorstep first thing in the morning."

"Mrs. Sandoval said nine o'clock. I'm Grace Moore. From the temp agency."

He spit a four-letter word. Her eyes flickered, and her cheeks filled with color. His anger dissolved like salt in water. *Great. Just great.* "I forgot you were coming."

She looked like she'd rather be any place but here, not that he could blame her. He debated telling her to come back tomorrow, but knew she wouldn't. He was up now. He might as well stay up. Jerking his head, he let the door drift open. "Come on in."

He'd gone through four temps in the last month. Mrs. Sandoval was losing patience faster than he was. "I'll send you one more, Mr. Velasco, and if she doesn't work out, I'll give you the name of my competitor."

He was looking for someone to field calls and handle the mundane details of correspondence, bills, scheduling. He didn't want a drill sergeant, a maiden aunt, or an amateur psychologist to analyze his artist's psyche. Nor did he need a curvy blonde in a low-cut blouse who pushed papers around, but didn't have a clue where to file them. She had ideas about what an artist might want besides a woman with office skills. He might have taken her up on her offer if he hadn't had enough experience with women like her. She lasted three days.

Not hearing any footsteps behind him, Roman paused and looked

back. The girl was still standing outside. “What’re you waiting for? An engraved invitation?”

She entered and closed the door quietly behind her. She looked ready to bolt.

He offered an apologetic smile. “Long night.”

She murmured something he didn’t catch, and he decided not to ask her to repeat it. He felt the onset of a headache, and the click of her high heels on the stone-tile floor wasn’t helping. He was thirsty and needed caffeine. He went into the kitchen adjoining the living room. She stopped at the edge of his sunken living room and gaped at the cathedral ceilings and wall of glass overlooking Topanga Canyon. Sunlight streamed through the windows, reminding him most people were serving time on their nine-to-fives by now.

Opening the stainless steel refrigerator, Roman grabbed a bottle of orange juice. He removed the cap, drank from the bottle, and lowered it. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Grace Moore.”

She had the right look for the job—cool, calm, collected. Pretty, midtwenties, trim and fit, but not his type. He liked voluptuous blondes who knew the score.

Feeling his perusal, she looked at him. Women usually did, but not with her guarded expression. “You have a beautiful view, Mr. Velasco.”

“Yeah, well, everything gets old eventually.” He put the bottle of orange juice on the counter. She looked uncomfortable. Understandable, considering his less-than-friendly greeting. He smiled slightly. She looked back at him without expression. Good. He needed a worker bee, not a girlfriend. Would she take offense at his first request?

“Do you know how to make coffee?”

She looked over at the one-touch automatic coffee-and-espresso machine that could grind beans, heat milk, and make a latte in less than sixty seconds with the press of a pinkie.

“Not a cup. A full pot of real coffee.” He left the kitchen to her. “Use the regular coffeemaker.”

“Do you like it strong or weak?”

“Strong.” He headed down the hall. “We’ll talk more after I get cleaned up.”

Roman stepped into a shower big enough for three. Lathering himself, he added side jets to the overhead waterfall. If he hadn’t made such a bad first impression on Grace Moore, he’d let her wait while he had a twenty-minute, full-body water massage. Shutting off the tap, he stepped out, kicked aside used towels, and grabbed the last clean one off the cabinet shelf. Clothes spilled over the hamper. He had one pair of clean jeans left in the armoire. Pulling on a black T-shirt, he looked for shoes. He found the sneakers he’d worn the night before. No clean socks in the drawer.

The coffee smelled good. She was rearranging everything in the dishwasher. “I didn’t tell you to clean the kitchen.”

She straightened. “Would you rather I didn’t?”

“Go right ahead.”

She opened the lower cabinets and straightened again, perplexed. “Where do you keep your dishwashing soap?”

“I’m out.”

“Do you have a grocery list?”

“You’re the personal assistant. Start one.” She’d already cleaned the granite counter. He hadn’t seen it that shiny since he moved in. “Where’s the OJ?”

“You said you wanted coffee.” She filled a mug and set it in front of him. “If you use cream or sugar, you’ll have to tell me where you hide them.”

No sarcasm. He liked her tentative smile. “I take it black.” He took a sip. She’d passed the first test. “Not bad.” Better than Starbucks, but he didn’t want to hand out compliments too soon. There was more to the job than making coffee—a lot more. He hoped she’d be more

amenable to a variety of duties than the others Mrs. Sandoval had sent. One told him he could make his own coffee.

"I'll show you where you'll be working." He led her down the east wing and opened a door. "It's all yours." He didn't have to look inside to know what she faced.

The other temps all had something to say about it, but none seemed capable of knowing where and how to start. Would this girl be up to the task?

Grace Moore stood silent for a few seconds, then carefully stepped past him. She picked her way to the center of the room and looked around at the stacks of papers. The closet doors were open, revealing cardboard storage boxes, most unlabeled.

Roman debated leaving, but knew there would be the inevitable questions. "Think you can bring order to my chaos?" The girl was silent so long, he felt defensive. "Are you going to say something?"

"It'll take longer than a week to organize all this."

"I never said it had to be done in a week."

She looked back at him. "That's the longest you've kept a personal assistant, isn't it?"

The staffing manager must have warned her. "Yeah. That's about right, I guess. The last one left after three days, but then she thought all an artist needed was a nude model."

Grace Moore blushed crimson. "I don't model."

"Not a problem." Roman gave her a swift once-over and leaned against the doorjamb. "That's not what I'm after." She looked nervous again. He didn't want to scare this one away. "I need someone detail-oriented."

"Do you have a specific way you want your—" her gesture encompassed the mess—"information sorted?"

"If I did, the place wouldn't be such a mess."

She frowned slightly as she surveyed the room. "You'll want some kind of easily maintained system, I would imagine."

"If there is such a thing. Think you can do it?"

“I don’t know, but I’d like to try. I’ll have a better idea of what you need after I go through all this.”

Roman relaxed. She was frank and honest. He liked that. He had the feeling this girl would know exactly what to do and how to get it done quickly. The sooner, the better. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He finished his coffee. “You might last longer than all the rest.” He gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile and headed down the hall.

She came out of the room. “Mr. Velasco, we need to talk about a few essentials.”

He stopped, hoping nothing was about to spoil his sense of relief. “Essentials?”

“A desk and office chair, for starters. Filing cabinets, a phone, and all the other supplies for any normal office.”

He had said *detail-oriented*. “I’m an artist, in case you weren’t told. I don’t do normal. And that’s a lot of stuff you’re asking for on your first day on the job.”

“I can’t sit on a folding chair eight hours a day, five days a week, and I’ll need something more than a card table to work on. There’s barely open space on the floor.” She peered back into the room. “Is there a phone in there somewhere?”

“Yes. And a computer, unless the last temp girl walked off with it.”

“I’ll find them.”

“Do you really need all that?”

“Yes, if you want your stuff filed properly, not jammed helter-skelter into cardboard boxes or piled up like a beaver dam.”

Things weren’t looking as good as they had moments before. “There are contracts, sample sketches, letters of inquiry, the *stuff* of my business.” If Roman didn’t know the staffing manager would hang up on him, he’d tell Grace Moore where she could shove her list of essentials. Unfortunately, he knew what Mrs. Sandoval would do. He’d be right back to square one in this endless hunt for an assistant who was willing and able to do the job. Talia Reisner had planted the

idea of hiring someone to take care of what she called “the mundane minutiae of life” so he could concentrate on his art.

Grace Moore stood silent, not offering an apology. Did he have the right to expect one?

“Get whatever you need.”

“Where do you buy your office supplies?”

“I don’t.” He lifted the mug and realized he’d already downed the coffee. “Find the computer and figure it out.” He needed another cup of coffee before he did anything else.

“And you’ll be . . . ?”

“In my studio!”

“Which is where?”

“Down the other hall, up the stairs on the right.” He paused and looked back at her. “Take a self-guided tour of the house and get your bearings.” He left her standing in the hall. Grabbing the thermal pot from the coffeemaker, he headed for his studio.

Roman didn’t see his personal assistant for two hours. She tapped lightly at the doorframe and waited for permission to enter. She’d found the laptop. “I have the list and prices. If you have a credit card, I can place the order and have everything delivered by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Let’s get it done.” Tossing his pencil down, he dug in his back pocket and found it empty. He muttered a four-letter word. “Stay where you are. I’ll be right back.” His wallet wasn’t in or on the armoire or his bedside table. Angry now, he fished through his dirty laundry, checking pockets until he remembered he’d left it in the glove compartment of his car last night. Cursing loudly, he went to get it.

Grace Moore stood exactly where he’d left her. She held out the laptop rather than taking the credit card he offered. “If you approve of everything I’ve listed, you can put in your credit card information.”

“You do it!”

She flinched and let out a soft breath. “It’s your financial information.”

“Which you’re going to know if you do your job.” He took the laptop from her. Looking at the order total, he swore again. She headed for the door. “Where are you going?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t work for you.” She sounded apologetic, but uncompromising.

“Wait a minute!” He dumped the laptop on his drafting table and went after her.

She hurried down the stairs.

“Just hold on.” He followed her to the office, where she picked up her purse and looped the strap over her shoulder. She was pale, her eyes dark when she faced him. Had he scared her that badly?

She stepped forward, her hand clenched around the leather strap. “Please move.”

Roman saw she’d already cleared work space on the card table and made neat piles. He didn’t want this girl to leave. “Give me a hint why you’re quitting already.”

“I could give you a list.”

“Look.” He lifted his hands. “You’re catching me on a bad day.”

“Mrs. Sandoval said you don’t have any good ones.” She took a shaky breath and met his gaze.

She clearly regretted speaking so quickly, but he couldn’t argue. “Yeah, well, the people she sent weren’t a good fit. The whole process has been frustrating, to say the least.”

“That’s not my fault, Mr. Velasco.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

She took a step back. “I’m not trying to make you angry.”

Was that it? “I’m not angry with you. I’m just . . .” He muttered a foul word under his breath. “I don’t know what I want, but I think you’re what I need.”

She probably came from a nice tidy life. Two parents, nice home in a nice suburb, private school, college. A class act. He hadn’t said anything worse than what she’d hear in a mall, but clearly, she found him offensive. He’d have to be more careful if he wanted to keep

Grace Moore around. "You'll be working in here. I'll be in my studio. We won't be around each other that much."

"A personal assistant has to work in close contact with her boss. It's the nature of the job."

"*Personal* is a loaded word." He let his smile turn rogue. Seeing that didn't go over well, he removed any hint of innuendo. "Maybe I should call you something else."

"You can call me Ms. Moore."

She was unbending a little, but still setting boundaries. Okay. He'd honor them. "Ms. Moore it is." He could be respectful . . . when the situation called for it. She frowned, studying him like a bug under glass. "At least give me two weeks before you quit."

Her shoulders drooped slightly. "Two weeks." She made it sound like a lifetime, but she let the purse strap slip off her shoulder. "Please don't swear at me again."

"If I swear, it won't be aimed at you. But I'll try to be careful when you're around. Deal?" He held out his hand. She bit her lip before she accepted the gesture. Her hand was cold and trembled slightly before she withdrew it.

"I'd better get back to work."

He got the hint. If she proved to be as efficient as she looked, things might just work out this time. He found himself curious. "Why a temp agency?"

"It's the only thing I could find." She blushed.

He felt on firmer ground. "Good to know you need this job as much as I need an assistant." She didn't say anything. He tilted his head, studying her. "Where did you work before the temp agency?"

"At a public relations firm."

"And left because . . . ?"

"I was redundant, as the British would say." She glanced at him. "I have a letter of recommendation, if you'd like to see it."

"I'm sure Mrs. Sandoval vetted you."

She took a deep breath. "I do need this job, Mr. Velasco, but I'm

sure you understand I'm looking for something better than temp work. I'll give you my best while I'm here." She gave a slight shrug, as if not holding much hope that her best would be good enough. "You're a far cry from my last boss."

"A Philistine?" There was that blush again. He couldn't remember having met a girl who blushed at all, let alone three times in a few hours.

"He was a gentleman."

Meaning Roman wasn't. He'd been taught to play the role when necessary. "Why aren't you still with him?"

"He retired and turned his business over to another firm. They were fully staffed."

Roman looked her over again. He wasn't sure he liked anyone making rules in his house, but then this one had done more in two hours than the combined efforts of the other four. And he liked her. He didn't know why. Maybe it was her complete lack of interest in him. Might be nice to have someone who did the work and didn't ask too many questions.

"So, we're good?"

"For two weeks."

He gave a soft laugh. "Okay. We've both got work to do. Let's take care of the order so you can get going on yours."