

J. MARTINEZ BROWN

*The
Paris
Scandal*



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“Love is a canvas furnished by nature and embroidered by imagination.”

— Voltaire

APRIL/MAY 1880, PARIS

CHAPTER 1

I am proof that the best artists excel at deceit. Their lies, accomplished through subtle tones of paint on canvas, render even the most mundane subject beguiling.

With my brother John’s skillful brushstrokes, I’m no longer the awkward hunchback whose lumbering steps attract pitying glances but a Moroccan temptress whose virginal garb and headscarf belie her determination to seduce the object of her desire.

For this deception, John has dressed me in a makeshift robe. A chain of ornate silver triangles fastens the garment’s loose folds onto my uneven shoulders. To hold its hood over my head, the voluminous sleeves of my snow-white blouse, trimmed with orange ribbon, are gathered above my elbows. On his canvas, pungent plumes of ambergris rise from the urn at my feet. A tightly wrapped scarf conceals my hair, neck, and chin, all but my face: brows darkened, cheeks rouged, and a scarlet pout painted on my lips to match my lacquered nails.

My eyes are cast downward as if reveling in the smoke’s seductive power.

My true pallor—reflecting my bedridden childhood from the accident so horrendous my mind refuses its memory, and my family forbids its discussion—would have contrasted too greatly with the painting’s original model: a dusky Arab laundress. I know John wishes she’d consented to leave Morocco and its interminable rains, if not for the honor of being his muse or the glamour of Paris, then for the accolades sure to come at the painting’s debut next week at the Académie des Beaux-Arts’ Salon.

Anxious to complete it, John summoned me, along with the rest of our little family—Father, Mother, and our young sister, Violet—from Nice, our most recent stop on the endless Grand Tour that is our way of life. I’m not bothered that my participation is born from his desperation because for a few long aching hours, I’m no longer ugly.

I am desired.

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A wraith of cigarette smoke shadows John as he paces to and from his easel, ruminating over the painting's symmetry. His strokes have no set rhythm. Instead, he attacks the canvas like a swordsman. His brash ripostes fill in the painting's background, daubing texture into the whitewashed stucco walls, framing the pilasters' high friezes, or deepening the chiaroscuro behind the seductress's head. Only when outlining her arched brow, her set lips, and the small finger John finds so arresting—which I struggle to hold aloft at just the right angle because its ring is loose enough to slip off—does his brush slow, gently caressing the canvas.

How I long to sit, to drop my arms at my side! I don't. It would ruin the pose.

As if reading my mind, John murmurs, "You ache."

"I'm fine." Being the focus of his attention for these many hours is worth the agony in my crooked back.

He smiles. My lie absolves him.

Someone knocks on the studio door. John's guest doesn't wait for permission to enter 73 Rue Notre Dame des Champs. Friends do so at will and leave on whimsy. Few patrons are annoyed because his entourage—artists, musicians, and others who are flagrantly bohemian—are as interesting as their portraitist.

As Carroll Beckwith walks in, longing pricks my heart. John may suspect my feelings. Carroll doesn't. Thank God! John's friends pity me enough as it is.

Though it's only been half a year since they last saw each other, they hug like long-lost brothers. Carroll's features are sharp, as is his wit. But the rest of him is spare: his build, his opinions, and to his ceaseless dismay, his bank account. Like us, Carroll is an American. John met him when both studied at Monsieur Carolus-Duran's atelier.

"Ah, the Moroccan piece!" Scanning it, Carroll murmurs, "The tones are exquisite."

John shrugs, but like me, Carroll knows him too well: my brother is pleased with it.

Our friend glances around. The studio is even more cluttered than when they shared it. A piano flanks one wall. Another holds the glass case with his collection of butterflies: John's hobby since childhood. A green velvet drape, used as a backdrop, hangs from a brass rod against the third wall.

When Carroll's eyes alight on the unfinished portrait of Henry St. John Smith, he frowns; understandable since the Boston lawyer commissioned John, not Carroll, for the painting. It has

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happened before. Still, as far as John is concerned, any rivalry our dear friend may imagine between them is leavened by mutual respect.

“What have you decided to call this beautiful fantasy?” As Carroll’s eyes roam over me, I’m both thrilled and horrified. He’d lose that brash grin if he knew I was under this garb.

Without a second thought, John states, “*Fumée d’ ambre gris.*”

“It will certainly be finished in time for the Salon,” Carroll reasons.

John scowls. “It had better be. I’ll be damned if *Madame Pailleron* is my sole submission. Despite being a fourth-year entrant, I can ill afford the judges’ disdain.”

Carroll scrutinizes the portrait. Marie Pailleron stands in a lush garden with one knee bent and her skirt and petticoat raised to her ankles as if doing a jig. “True, it’s different,” he concedes. “Still, Parisians love their bohemians—especially the Paillerons. At least, the painting has the advantage of height—a Duran tenet yet to be disproven.”

He dusts off the settee before sitting. At one point, Mother insisted that a weekly visit from a maid would make the studio more presentable. John silenced her with a bemused retort: “It is what patrons expect. We lowly artists wouldn’t want to disappoint them.”

Carroll scrutinizes an unfinished work: that of a gypsy dancer in a sultry, exultant pose. “What you found in Spain and Morocco certainly agreed with you.”

“The colors were entirely different. Morocco is extraordinary! The thunderstorms are crystalline. Everything about it is—” John pauses, searching for the right word: “Breathtaking!”

Carroll’s eyes turn back to me. “I would say so.”

Shocked, I blink.

He laughs at this.

“Whereas Spain is all greens and browns,” John continues. “Sultry and mystical.”

“And the model?” Carroll asks.

John sighs. “A fantasy. Gypsies move sensually, but none have the patience to pose.”

“The Moroccan is real enough,” Carroll murmurs. His wink causes my hand to waver.

“An Arab. I found her in Tétouan.” John points at the canvas. “Exotic, isn’t she?”

“What little I can see of her.”

Though thrilled by his words, I force myself to stand still.

Thankfully, John misses Carroll’s smirk. My brother’s eyes are still on the canvas as he explains, “Though she speaks neither English nor French, she intuits what one desires.”

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“I’m sure you found other ways to make your feelings known,” Carroll replies.

I’m shocked enough that I have to stifle a gasp. Carroll laughs.

I pray John’s obsession with the painting’s details outlasts Carroll’s patience and saves us both from the embarrassment of his unwitting flirtatiousness.

“Where is Paul?” John asks. “He’s yet to see my progress with this piece.”

“He’s on his way.” Whenever possible, to stretch his meager funds, Carroll stays with friends. While in Paris, he’s the guest of the artist Paul Helleu.

“Where are you dining tonight?”

“Café Anglais, with your cousin, Ralph, and Ed Simmons—but after the opera. Paul’s mother has lent him her box.” Carroll winks at me. “Perhaps you and your lovely muse can join us.”

Embarrassment flares my cheeks. Thankfully, Carroll can’t see that beneath all this rouge.

John appreciates Verdi, but the opportunity to mingle with the Parisienne chic is even more tantalizing. “Emily dear, go back to the boarding house and get ready. Tell Mother we’re dining out.”

I take off my robe. Though fully dressed beneath it, Carroll could not be more shocked if I’d been naked.

I’d find this amusing if it weren’t so heartbreaking. Few artists find beauty in disfigurement. I now know Carroll is no exception.

To hide his dismay, he stutters, “*Emily?*... Ah! Welcome back to Paris.”

“Thank you. It’s always good to see you too.” I hold out my hand.

My kindness puts a smile on his lips again. “The Salon draws us artists like flies to honey.”

That he considers me an equal makes my heart swell with joy.

When Carroll was at Duran’s atelier, and funds were low, he’d come home with John. Our landlady, Madame Derode, would happily part with an extra chop for a mere sou. Once I’d left my sketch album on our parlor table. I found Carroll studying a watercolor I’d painted of a Brittany hillside. He asked, “Did John do this?” I admitted, “It’s mine.” Surprised, he complimented it and suggested shading the clouds with yellow to heighten their depth.

I knew then his praise was genuine, as was his friendship.

Am I foolish to take both to heart, to hope that, perhaps, it could grow into something more?

I’ll find out tonight.

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Like a frantic moth fluttering between the equally enticing glows of two gas lamps, Mother scurries from my closet to where I stand clothed only in chemise, corset, and petticoat.

“Perhaps you should have created an excuse to stay home,” she despairs.

“You feel that way because I don’t have a suitable gown?” I gawk at her. “I love *Aida*. I’d go in a gunnysack! Besides, no one will be looking at me. All eyes will be on the stage—”

“*He* will be looking,” she insists.

Laughing, I shake my head. “You mean Carroll?”

Mother sighs. “Silly girl! Why else would he have asked John to bring you along?”

A convenient fantasy! Should John’s career continue to grow and fate also put me in the hands of a loving husband—preferably an artist—my parents’ financial concerns would be over. Mother forgets it’s much easier for an artist with no family money to buffer the inevitable economic slumps when the woman he loves comes with a generous dowry.

I shrug. “He thought I was someone else.”

Anyone but me. I’m more likely to hold a physician’s fascination, if only as the subject of a medical study.

Still, I have no choice but to go. To stay home means listening to Mother bemoan my fate as a lifelong spinster.

Mother groans—not because I’ve convinced her of the folly of her delusion but because my wardrobe leaves her frustrated. My few evening dresses, primly high-necked and long-sleeved, come in sullen colors. No need to draw attention to my deformity.

Finally, she plucks a gown from the closet’s deep recesses. “This one!” She thrusts it toward me with the insistence of a bazaar vendor desperate to make a sale on a rainy afternoon. The skirt, made of lavender damask, gathers tightly in the back before unfurling into a short train. Its long sleeves, flared at the wrist, are trimmed in filmy lace.

“No! My shoulders will be exposed.” Though society loves the graceful arc of a woman’s neck, it disdains a hump on her back.

“It will work!” Mother’s fervor equals that of a barrister doggedly seeking clemency for a convict on his way to the gallows. “*Violet!* My white tulle scarf—fetch it and my sewing basket.”

Book in hand, my little sister rolls out from under her bed, where she has hidden since I mentioned my evening plans. Welcoming even this minor role in my excitement, she dashes off.

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Soon Violet reappears with the requested items. As Mother works, Vi declares, “John should ask me to pose for him.”

“You fidget, which defeats the purpose,” I remind her. “And besides, he wasn’t painting me. He needed me to pose as the Moroccan temptress for her fingers.” I assume the pose now ingrained in every fiber of my body.

“Ah! John told me all about her.” Vi’s brows rise in tandem with her smirk.

Dare I ask? I can’t resist: “What exactly did he say?”

“That the urn’s vapors allow her to mesmerize men.” She scrutinizes me. “Luckily, he didn’t need to alter her back.”

Hurt, I put down my hands. “You’re cruel.”

Contritely, Vi mutters, “*Sorry.*”

Mother sighs, but she doesn’t take sides. As always, she dismisses Vi’s impudence as precociousness. Instead, she continues her handiwork, cutting the scarf into equal halves, then tucking each end into the back of the gown. After stitching them below the neckline, she layers them into pleats and fans them into a frothy stole before suturing them to the nearest shoulder. Crossing the scarf’s loose ends, she sews them into the bodice.

“Voila!” She holds up the gown.

When I put it on, her joy is justified. My hump is barely discernible.

All too soon, John’s hearty baritone alerts us that he, Carroll, and Paul are here.

Mother gasps. “Already? And what luck! Madame Derode lost two guests this morning. She’ll have plenty of pot-au-feu to go around—”

Oh, dear! I’d forgotten that John asked me to tell Mother we’d be dining out.

As I stammer through an apology, she wilts. “But...John so rarely eats at home these days!”

I pat Mother’s hand. “Others want his company. And through them, he meets those who may commission portraits. Isn’t that what we want?”

Mother’s resigned smile signals that John is forgiven. In the Sargent universe, he has always been the sun. But as his star brightens, it pulls an ever-growing number of admirers to him. Our family, which once orbited closest to his radiance, is now its farthest outpost. Soon, even Mother will have to admit this.

Straightening my shoulders, I take a final look in the mirror. I’m impressed by the young lady who stares back: twenty-three, tall but slight, with a nose annoyingly sharper than she’d

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like. A fussy fringe hides a high forehead. A tortoise-shell comb studded with pearls holds the rest of her light brown hair in a tidy twist. Hope glistens in her deep-set green eyes.

Should John achieve financial success that assures his independence and the family's security, our aging parents' needs will be shifted onto my uneven shoulders. This is only fair since my affliction has been their burden to bear all these years.

Still, don't I, too, deserve an independent life?

It starts today.

CHAPTER 2

John tells our driver, “Théâtre de l’Opéra, s’il vous plaît—by way of the Louvre.”

Despite a generous fare meant to offset the inevitable argument over the circuitous route, our driver mutters a curse before nudging the carriage into the bustling street.

No matter. Even a fleeting glance at Paris’s grand museum bodes good luck to John.

Carroll sits next to me, though not by choice. He winced when John angled past him and took the seat beside Paul. I assume Carroll is still chagrined at having flirted with me.

To put him at ease, I smile. “In London, I hope you found Ben Castillo to be a jolly fellow.” Carroll was hosted there by our childhood friend from Cuba.

“He sends his regards,” he replies. “Oddly, he doesn’t appear to pine for his homeland except to insist its exotic beauty is worth seeing in one’s lifetime.”

John chuckles. “He’s like most expatriates. All roads may lead home, but it’s a matter of when, if ever, one wishes to take the journey.”

Noting Paul’s surprise, I add, “Having lived in Europe all our lives, we’re more at home with its customs.”

“Surely your relations hold some fascination,” he insists.

I shrug. “We’ve only been to America once and have so little in common with them.”

“You’re too kind,” John says dryly. “They found us odd. We thought them dull.”

A grin twitches Carroll’s mustache. “The Sargents’ nomadic ways are unconventional.”

“Admit it. You love us,” John teases. “And you love Europe. How will you ever go home?”

Disappointment flattens Carroll’s smile. “I wish it weren’t my only choice.”

Success is always on his mind. Or perhaps failure.

The detour to the Louvre is well worth it. Whereas John’s window affords him a view of the museum, mine looks out onto the Tuileries. Men and women stroll in pairs along the garden’s

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flower beds. Though their features are dulled by dusk's gauzy cloak, their mutual desire is pantomimed. When a suitor wraps his arm around his beloved's waist, her lips lift into a guileful smile. As a woman stops short to dab away tears, the man at her side pulls her into his arms. Another couple finds words unnecessary as their fingers intertwine.

Is this because desire so easily makes itself known through yearning gazes? Is silence the true language of love?

As if reading my mind, Paul murmurs, "Everyone should be loved at least once."

Finally, Théâtre de l'Opéra is in sight. I crane my neck to see the milling crowd: men in frock coats and chapeaux claque hover like black albatrosses over the colorful sea of satin-clad women as they make their way into the opera house's grande foyer.

Our coach door opens. John steps out first, then Paul. Carroll also steps down and holds out his hand to me. But his eyes follow the flurry of silk, lace, and laughter alighting from the carriage behind ours.

I feel like a crow among peacocks.

How long will it take Carroll to catch the eye of one lovely mademoiselle? What bit of conversation will he use as an opening ploy to seek her out later? Perhaps she'll arrange to meet him "by chance" in a park with a careless chaperone.

Love is a game in which Carroll is a very active participant.

Stupid me—as if I could play! Already I've broken its first rule: I don't attract. I repulse.

My crooked back assures this.

Carroll and I are good friends. If I expect more from him, I'll lose that too.

From now on, I'll merely be a spectator of love's sideshow. That way, even while witnessing acts of adoration—a blush resulting from a knowing grin, a flirtatious wink, the brush of one stranger's finger on another's naked wrist—my heart will stay whole.

I have Johnny's love. I can live with that.

At least, that's what I tell myself.

Like sentries at attention, rows of pillars line the opera house's foyer on both sides of the auditorium's entrance. Their bases, made of sterling silver carved in intricate patterns, rise in gold-leafed glory to the ceiling's murals. Over our heads, a coquettish wood nymph holds Apollo enraptured. Even the stoic miens on the bronze busts showcased throughout this grand room—of

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such musical geniuses as Mozart, Beethoven, and Halévy—seem to have softened into sly grins as if laughing at the preening opera patrons forming the gauntlet we must maneuver to enter the theater.

John’s height makes him noticeable even in the lobby’s thick crowd. To his dismay, one observer fervently calls out his name. Though petite, this matron is also well-ballasted and so determined to make herself known to him that she forces the undulating sea of elegant gowns to part in her wake.

A younger woman follows closely on her heels lest the course is again roiled in taffeta, lace, and velvet.

John’s groan is only audible to our party. He moves behind the nearest column, beckoning us to join him. As we do, the crowd surges around us. After a moment, John hisses, “Emily, please—take a peek.”

I inch my way beyond the column until I spot them:

Having lost her prey, the older woman stops abruptly. As she scans the crowd, the younger one steps on her heels, earning a scolding that turns the heads of those close enough to hear it.

“Who is it?” Paul asks.

“Elizabeth Burckhardt,” John murmurs. “An American. Her husband is a Swiss banker.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to point out that she is exceedingly annoying and that the younger woman—her daughter, Louise—is only slightly less so. Though Louise has none of her mother’s guile, she has inherited the woman’s insipidity. Instead, I explain: “While at Duran’s studio, John painted Mrs. Burckhardt’s younger daughter, Valérie, as one of his assignments.”

Paul shrugs. The memory escapes him.

Not surprising. Neither daughter is a great conversationalist, but at least Valérie has the good sense to stay silent on a subject she knows nothing about, unlike Louise, who feels even an inane comment is better than none.

In their favor, their mother’s tactic eludes them: to speak as an expert on all topics despite her lack of knowledge on most.

Thankfully, droning gongs warn the crowd that the opera’s first act begins soon. The Burckhardts have also altered their course and are now deep within the tsunami of patrons heading toward the theater. To be expected. Mrs. Burckhardt’s sole purpose here is to watch others make their entrances and harbors no pretenses that anyone anticipates her arrival.

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As my brother sighs with relief, I continue: “John has recently painted her husband as a commission. But then he offered the portrait as a wedding gift to Valérie and her betrothed.” Sputtering through my giggles, I add: “Unfortunately, Mrs. Burckhardt took it as John’s overture to court Louise. To encourage this fantasy, she’s commissioned *Louise’s* portrait!”

John winces at my taunt.

Carroll chortles, “That commission may cost you dearly, friend! I suppose now may not be the best time to tell you she confided to me she thinks you’re quite the catch.”

“All the more reason to prolong it as long as possible,” John mutters.

I laugh with the others at John’s wishful thinking.

Ignoring us, he leads the way.

We enter the Helleus’ box to find our cousin, Ralph Curtis, and Edward Simmons seated. They are surprised to see John and me but also delighted. Edward, slim and fair, is a student at Académie Julian. Ralph studies at Carolus-Duran’s atelier.

Our box—center, stage left—is ideally situated to watch the city’s beau monde. We hear them too: “La belle Americaine!” “C’est magnifique, nes pa?...” and “Madame Gautreau enchante...” are just a few phrases in the frenzied tide of excited whispers lapping against us.

“Apparently, our beautiful compatriot has arrived,” Carroll declares.

Glancing around, I ask, “Who is it?”

Ralph looks up from his opera glasses. “Cousin, you’ve been away much too long.”

“Just six months. And unlike you, I don’t start my day by reading the gossip in *Le Figaro*.”

“Touché.” Ralph points across the theatre. “Madame Gautreau has been the toast of the town even before her marriage two years ago. To an exporter. Boring fellow—Pedro, I think.”

I look where all heads have turned: the box directly across the theatre.

Madame Gautreau stands with shoulders thrust back, and head held high. She removes her silver satin cape, revealing a simple gown. White with no sleeves, entwined gold and silver ropes secure it to her shoulders and form the bodice, exposing generous décolletage and a precious waist complemented by rounded hips. Though gossamer as fairy wings, the skirt’s draping provides necessary modesty.

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She is not beautiful. Her forehead is too high, her nose too long, and her chin is honed to a point. Her cheeks angle high above deep hollows. Her hair is the color of an overripe plum. And yet, she exudes a certain majesty not founded in disdain but anticipation.

Another in her party is a woman: like she, around twenty, but her pallid complexion and pinched lips age her. One man, perhaps already forty, is short and thickset with a beard and curly hair. The other man is younger by a few years, taller, goateed, with swarthy good looks. His suit, the latest fashion, fits superbly.

Madame Gautreau takes the outer seat in the front row, the best position to be seen by those in the gallery. Since stealing glances at her is the crowd's goal, everyone is satisfied.

The handsome man—her husband, I presume—takes the outer seat in the box's second row.

The curtain rises. Caught in the glow of the footlights, Madame Gautreau's face takes on a pearlescent sheen.

"A strange, wondrous creature!" John whispers. "And that complexion...."

"Lavender," Edward explains. "Her face powder is laced with chlorate of potash-lozenge."

John laughs. "I suppose you'd know! You fraternize with enough *fardées*."

Seeing my face redden, Edwards shrugs. "Prostitutes are my muses. That aside, I learn everything about La Belle Gautreau. I stalk her, as one does a deer! *I want to paint her.*"

Ralph snickers. "As does every other artist in Paris!"

John remains impassive, but I know him too well. He, too, is in her thrall.

Within the walls of the Palais Garnier, two melodramas play out in tandem.

The one onstage tells of two princesses. Both love the Egyptian warrior betrothed to one and the captor of the other. But I'm more interested in the pantomime in Madame Gautreau's box. There, she is the only prima donna and performs to an audience of one.

Though seemingly enthralled by Verdi's rousing score, her hand rests on the railing. The tall man has done likewise. It is close enough that his thumb now caresses her smallest finger.

Am I the only witness to this tender rite of marital bliss? I glance around...

John's gaze has yet to leave her face.

When it is finally time for the singers' duet finale, Madame Gautreau leans forward. Her gown's braided strap slips off her shoulder. Once properly though beguilingly cantilevered, too much of the plump breast is exposed. Her nipple sits at the periphery of scandal.

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Is she so mesmerized by the opera that she is unaware of her predicament?

The man also sees this. He is tantalized. But finally, seemingly without Madame Gautreau's awareness, he nudges the strap into place.

Just in time. The curtain falls to deafening applause.

Edward glances over at the Gautreaus. The longing has not left his face.

Will I ever incite such unabashed adoration?

Edward must feel my eyes upon him because he shifts my way. Embarrassed, I murmur, "She and Monsieur Gautreau make a handsome couple."

"*That little toad?*" Edward's gape suggests I've lost my mind.

I glance back at the tall man. By now, he has placed a deferential hand on the other woman's elbow, whereas the shorter, bearded man stands beside Madame Gautreau.

"Oh! ... But the *younger* man...." I blush at the memory of what I've witnessed.

Edward snickers. "It's an easy mistake to make. He's her lover."

Noting my surprise, Paul adds, "An open secret. Dr. Samuel Pozzi is the gynecologist to the beau monde." He nods toward the other woman. "His wife is that church mouse."

I stutter, "But... to make love—in front of one's wife..."

Or husband, for that matter. Madame Gautreau's complicity was apparent.

"It isn't Pozzi's first affair," Paul replies. "And Pierre Gautreau has been cuckolded before. They say the diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps was once her lover too."

Perplexed, I ask, "Pierre?... But... Isn't her husband's name Pedro?"

"'Pedro' is merely the nickname Monsieur Gautreau uses with his suppliers in Chile. His family dabbles in banking and shipping, but the bulk of his fortune comes from...well, quite bluntly, from *mérde*—not human, but bat feces. 'Guano' is used as fertilizer."

Ralph hoots, "Such irony! Even as she cuckolds him, Amélie gives him the cachet that his career and looks cannot."

Carroll guffaws, "Madame Gautreau is known as *Amélie*?" Pointedly, he stares at me.

At first, his wicked grin perplexes me. But then it comes to me:

He thinks it amusing—indeed, ironic—that I share my Christian name with the most celebrated woman in Paris.

More proof that he could never really love me.

CHAPTER 3

– APRIL 30 –

Tomorrow is the Salon’s *Vernissage*—that is to say, Varnishing Day.

John and I take a carriage that follows the delivery wagon to the Palais de l’Industrie et des Beaux-arts. Even before reaching the palace, we see the army of artists who now the streets for several blocks around it. Each submits at least one work of art, some with dozens.

The Salon’s jury of forty renowned artists selects only two thousand works. The process is not a kind one, nor is it always fair. Like mistresses who, in private, have ably embodied every secret fantasy but lose their intrigue in the presence of more captivating consorts, soon hundreds of paintings will be callously abandoned on these sidewalks.

Carroll, Edward, and Ralph greet us at the back entrance. From there, those who, like John, have already secured their place in the exhibition may enter quickly. Their art will be placed at eye level in the more prestigious rooms. John’s paintings will be showcased in Salle Quinze. An Honorable Mention awarded for one of last year’s submissions, a portrait of John’s mentor, Carolus-Duran, secured him this privilege. Should John earn another—or, better yet, place second—only a French artist will win the grand prize—he’ll be granted lifetime submission.

Fumée d’ambre gris is over five feet high and four feet wide. *Madame Pailleron* is larger: over nine feet high and almost six feet wide. John commandeers two commissionaires to carry the paintings into the building. Hulking and round-shouldered, already their loose shirts are drenched with the sweat of their labors. Assured his works are securely fastened to the easels on their backs, John beckons them to follow us.

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Before the jury gives its verdict, one must run another gauntlet just as daunting: the throng of artists lining the grand staircase who must still submit their works before the jury. More than one may mutter “Quelle horreur! ...” while gazing at a rival artist’s handiwork through envious eyes.

Heads swivel as John’s canvases are carried up the steps. Amazed, all chatter ceases. When he reaches the landing, applause echoes through the lobby.

John bows. By his blushes, I know his competitors’ response touches him deeply.

Tomorrow, we shall see if the critics and judges feel likewise.

— MAY 1, MORNING —

I rise early and dress quickly. John is already at the studio, filling a large tin case with turpentine, linseed oil, a pallet, brushes, palette knives, and a myriad of oil pigment tubes: all necessary should he find some flaw not previously noticed. He’ll also take enough varnish to secure proper sheens on both paintings.

Varnishing Day is not only for the artists. Although the Salon is a two-month affair, those possessing or seeking social caché will have purchased tickets for the privilege of watching the painters put the finishing touches on their works. Painters don’t discourage this breach. Such exclusivity encourages impulsive sales and future commissions.

It’s not just the judges and art critics who render opinions. The beau monde can be just as complimentary, abjectly crueler, and, ironically, wields more influence on patrons and purchasers.

By the time John has varnished both paintings, the crowd is at its thickest. Ralph, Paul, Carroll, and Edward have been walking the exhibition floor, listening to others’ appraisals of the works on display. They are almost at our side when a woman faints from the pungent smell of turpentine that permeates the air. Luckily, her husband catches her before her head hits the marble floor.

Ralph sighs. “She’s the fifteenth fainter we’ve seen today! I’d be wealthy if I had a concession for smelling salts.”

“This is a much larger crowd than last year’s and warmer,” Paul explains.

“Not to mention more competitive,” Carroll grumbles.

“Which paintings caught your eye?” I ask.

Edward shrugs. “Alexandre Cabanel’s *Phaedra* was interesting.”

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Ralph chuckles. “A woman, naked and in bed. What’s not to love?”

“Ah!... Perhaps that’s why there’s a preponderance of nudes.” Carroll snickers. “Despite the efforts of the Impressionists, wood nymphs and Grecian goddesses are still the rage, at least in the eyes of the Académie.”

Edward groans. “As are portraits of the pompous. The poses—so stilted!”

“Remember, John won a prize for Duran’s portrait,” I point out. “So, perhaps the Académie’s judges aren’t so set in their ways.”

“Just in case John’s win was a passing fancy, I’ll focus on nude goddesses,” Ralph mutters. “It seems to be the only way an American can win Monsieur Julian’s favor,”

Ralph’s wealth alleviates any urgency to prove himself. The Bostonian Sargents and Curtises multiplied their prosperity by diversifying into banking. If only our branch of the family had done likewise!

And yet, like the rest of our friends, acceptance to the Salon burns like a fire in Ralph’s gut. I envy him for his unwavering belief in his talent.

As the Salon’s judges make their way over, Paul murmurs to John, “Now we’ll see if your luck holds out.”

I step away with the others so the judges may shake John’s hand. Their eyes then turn to *Fumée d’ ambre gris*. Some scribble notes. Unconcerned, John’s smile broadens.

Our parents and sister arrive on their heels. Proud smiles reflect the bits of conversation they overhear. Tucking her hand into Carroll’s, Violet ecstatically whispers, “A judge called the Moroccan painting ‘a melodic fantasy!’”

Edward nods. “Excellent metaphor! Her pose, the mesmerizing look on her face—especially those hands...”

As Edward’s voice dies off, Carroll catches my eye. My cheeks redden as he arches a brow. Heaven knows why I feel any need to be embarrassed. I’ve never sought a potion that would render me with the ecstatic expression John captured so exquisitely on the original model’s face.

I grimace at the thought of John seeing such desire in my eyes. He would know why—
And he’d want to paint me.

Edward has stopped chattering. Why is he staring at me?

No—his gaze is focused beyond my shoulder. I look around:

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Behind me, Amélie Gautreau studies a large landscape painting. Her fitted suit, made of watered silk, emphasizes a waist cinched so tightly that it is as slim as a child's. However, she eschewed a bustle, which is very popular with the beau monde, worn even with their daytime attire. Her suit, an iridescent turquoise, emphasizes the beauty's wraith-like pallor. Her gloves and boots are pale green. Her hair is swept up in a chignon. The peacock plume that adorns her chapeau shares those exact colors.

Her graceful attitudes—the tilt of her head and her regal bearing—seem both natural and artificial. She knows she is being watched but puts on a charade of obliviousness, betraying herself with only cursory glances at the paintings within view.

Ralph nudges Edward. “Great luck, old boy! Your prey is within stalking distance.”

Edward's face flushes a deep red. He opens his mouth to say something, only to gasp.

Hearing it, Amélie looks our way.

We freeze in place, all eyes on her.

Perhaps she'll mistake us for a life-size tableau...

Surprisingly, she ignores our stares. Does she ever tire of such unabashed scrutiny, the adoration, the expectation of notoriety? Are there times when a peacock craves anonymity or is the flaunting of plumage as vital to its survival as the air it breathes?

Only John is unaware of her presence. He's in an animated discussion with two women, art critics from America who are exclaiming their delight over *Madame Pailleron's* playful pose.

“She is indeed a striking woman.” Monsieur Gautreau's voice is so gentle that it's a wonder I heard him at all. He now stands behind his celebrated wife. His voice is too soft to command attention. His forehead is already beaded with sweat, which must be exceedingly uncomfortable. Hung from floor to ceiling on every wall, the paintings are such a feast for the eye that the Salon's roaming patrons jostle him obliviously, then register their shock at his existence with cursory nods.

How dismaying it must be when they gawk at the renowned beauty at his side.

“Pedro, do you mean the one dancing the jig?” asks the older woman accompanying them. Like Madame Gautreau, her build is slight, and her face is sharply angled. The resemblance is enough for one to see that she is the younger woman's mother, although her face is devoid of Madame Gautreau's most striking feature: a long nose.

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Monsieur Gautreau shakes his head. “No, Madame Avegno. The painting of the Oriental is more intriguing. Her stance, the way she holds her hood”—he takes a step closer to *Fumée d’ambre gris* — “and the way the one finger, the smallest of them, is arched just so.”

“He means *your* finger, Emily!” Violet exclaims. “You made a fine model after all.”

Hearing her declaration, the women pivot to me.

Upset, I turn to avoid their gawks only to come face to face with Monsieur Gautreau. He smiles. “You were the artist’s model, mademoiselle?”

I can only nod. Like Edward, I find my tongue stilled by the Gautreaus’ attentions.

Madame Gautreau’s head tilts downward as her eyes sweep over me. My shawl does little to hide my hump. What a strange specimen I must seem to one so beautiful.

Before I can speak, Madame Gautreau blithely declares, “No wonder the painter covered her from head to toe—and yet, he saw beauty in that creature!”

Monsieur Gautreau blushes. His wife may feel no shame, but he does: keenly enough that he forcefully steers her away.

Suddenly, everyone is clapping. The jurists are lauding John. Delighted, Violet runs to his side.

I understand her desire to bask in the warm glow of our brother’s success. Through glassy eyes, I clap too. I can’t—*won’t*—let the Gautreau woman ruin John’s moment.

Edward hesitates, then murmurs, “Not all deformities are physical.”

I shrug. “If you’re referring to your ‘prey,’ what flaw do you now perceive in her?”

“I come from five generations of parsons. If anyone knows how talking too much is just as debilitating as a twisted back, it’s me. You should pity her.”

“Never!” I retort. “If Madame Gautreau ‘talks too much,’ it’s because she assumes she’ll be forgiven improprieties that would ruin the rest of us.”

“She’s wrong,” he insists. “Just last year, a mob of art students carried a nude model through Paris. The citizens respectfully bowed to her beauty. Conversely, a fortnight later, an actress who appeared nude in a play was madly applauded” —Edward pauses— “until she made the inartistic mistake of taking a curtain call. She was hissed off the stage. The moral, Emily dear, is that being uniquely different—as you are—may attract attention, which is not necessarily bad. But being callous will never be viewed as a virtue.”

“So you say,” I mutter.

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He frowns. I don't mean to be terse, but Edward denies one sad reality of celebrity; it is a form of currency.

Before explaining further, Mother moves to my side with John, Father, and Violet in tow. “*Fumée* has just been sold!” Violet exclaims. “John insists on treating everyone to lunch.”

“Café Anglais it is,” Carroll exclaims. Artists dine there because it is close enough to the Académie and promptly serves a filling lunch for only a few sous.

“It will be much too crowded,” John insists. “Let's go to Ledoyen.”

Paul groans. “The line will be circling the block with Varnishing Day socialites!”

Ralph laughs. “Which is why Scamps prefers it too. Now that he is their new darling, he must grace them with his presence.”

Giggling at Ralph's nickname for our brother, Vi pulls me so that we may follow them.

“Not us, Emily,” Mother declares. “The family is to lunch at Madame Derode's. But first, the market. I've promised John a party to celebrate the critics' reviews and his sale.”

She now has the role she covets: hostess to a celebrated artist.

As such, I'm relegated to carrying out all tasks she deems necessary.

Will I always be her supplicant? Will I never have a life of my own, let alone a career?

I must break her of this assumption. The sooner, the better.

CHAPTER 4

– LATER THAT EVENING –

The melodic finger play of my piano duet with John—a four-handed piece, Schubert’s *Fantasia in F Minor*—intoxicates those who have come to celebrate the sale of John’s painting.

I glance at our audience’s enraptured faces. Mother sits in the front row, close enough for me to hear her fervent chant: “*Senza tempo! Senza tempo...*” As with all things in our lives, she is the maestro. We are merely her players.

Chairs were borrowed from every room in the boarding house. The rows are so tight that the dresses of those women seated seem to create one vast, colorful lap quilt.

Besides Paul, Ralph, Carroll, and Edward, several artists with works showcased at the Salon are here, including Elizabeth Gardner and her fiancé, the renowned painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau. They merit the Salon’s permanent admission. Had the New York financier, George Seney, not already purchased *La Confidence*—Elizabeth’s mesmerizing painting of two peasant girls whispering secrets—no doubt it would have earned her another jury prize.

The Paillerons have come with a young protégé, Georges Feydeau. Like Édouard, he writes farces. They’ve also brought Young Édouard is exactly Violet’s age. At the demand of his younger sister, Marie-Louise, they’ve run off to tease Madame Derode’s cat, thus proving that John’s nickname for the girl—“petite sauvage”—is apt.

The Pailleron children’s portrait sittings are trying John’s patience. Sometimes he plays his banjo for her to coerce the exceedingly precocious Marie-Louise to behave. When he refuses to excuse her boredom, she pouts angrily. It has forced John to make good on his threat to paint her that way.

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John and Carroll’s mentor, Carolus-Duran, is also here. His bellowing laugh adds to his already-commanding presence granted through height and girth. He arrived with his wife, Pauline, and also their beautiful daughter, Marie-Anne, who seems enthralled by Monsieur Feydeau.

Like feathers caught in a breeze, the final stanza of our recital floats through the room. After a pause, our guests applaud. Our dear friend, the pianist Gabriel Fauré, leaps up to announce: “John is just as proficient a pianist as he is an artist!”

His declaration causes Mother’s bosom to swell with pride.

Realizing his compliment excluded me, Gabriel catches my eye and mouths: *Désolé*.

I shrug. My most significant frustration is how often I am hidden in John’s shadow.

After bowing to our audience, John beckons Gabriel to the piano. He waves off the request, reluctant to leave the woman at his side: the poetess Judith Gautier. Finally, our guests’ encouraging entreaties force him to reconsider.

When he begins, I recognize the ominous trills of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The piece is appropriate twice over. Wagner is one of John’s favorite composers, and it’s well known that Judith was once the composer’s lover.

Mother moves between our guests, refilling their wine glasses. She motions me to do likewise. As I turn toward the sideboard laden with full carafes, Elizabeth Gardner taps my shoulder. “Where did John paint this piece?” She beckons me to follow her into the hallway, where she points to one of my watercolors of the Promenade des Anglais, in Nice.

“I...did this,” I stammer.

Impressed, Elizabeth murmurs, “Your styles are quite similar. Where did you study?”

“I...haven’t,” I mumble.

“You should apply,” she insists. “If this is what you can do as a self-taught artist, imagine what you might accomplish after a few years at an atelier.”

Just then, Duran passes us. Loudly, Elizabeth asks, “Wouldn’t you agree, monsieur?”

Distracted, he glances toward the foyer, where Anne-Marie giggles at something Georges has said. Seeing her father, she takes a step back from the young man.

Satisfied, Duran turns back to us. “Pardon moi?”

“This painting,” Elizabeth replies. “Isn’t it excellent?”

After studying it, Duran nods. “Excellent indeed! From John’s visit to Nice?”

Elizabeth points to me. “Emily painted it.”

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Surprised, Duran declares, “Impressive, Mademoiselle Emily.”

“Merci, monsieur.” My voice cracks from embarrassment.

“She would make a great addition to your atelier,” Elizabeth insists.

Duran’s back stiffens. “Unfortunately, I do not accept women.”

Elizabeth laughs. “Your loss, monsieur. A Sargent of any sex would be welcomed at many studios. Académie Julian, for one. William has no qualms about an artist’s gender.”

“You’re the greatest proof of that, mademoiselle. I’m sure William is quite the taskmaster.” Duran’s words and tone are meant to embarrass her. He’s not referring to Monsieur Bouguereau’s artistic reputation as a strict traditionalist or even Elizabeth’s ability to accurately mimic her fiancé’s inimitable style, which many critics view as a blessing and curse. His jibe references her years-long affair with William.

Undeterred by Duran’s taunt, Elizabeth laughs heartily. Not above eschewing social norms, she once dressed in trousers to be admitted to classes to paint nudes. She did the same to study the tapestries at the Gobelins factory.

Rankled, Duran retreats to the parlor.

Elizabeth shrugs. “Emily, I’m sorry if you found me too harsh. But he, of all people, knows that art isn’t the domain of any one sex. My God, his wife, Pauline, is a miniaturist of note! It’s a shame that she’s given up her art.”

“Madame Duran moans that their children keep her from it,” I point out.

“The Durans employ a governess,” Elizabeth retorts. “In truth, Duran insists that their social engagements be her sole focus. He lives to rival his patron’s wealth and celebrity. But his airs don’t fool them—or, for that matter, the artists who are his true peers.” Her eyes move to John, who leans against the wall as he listens raptly to Gabriel’s eloquent virtuosity. “Your brother has a much better chance at that dream.”

“Monsieur Duran is an artist first and foremost,” I insist. “Even his manner of dress speaks to his disregard for the staid conventions adhered to by his patrons.”

I once watched as Marie-Louise froze at the sight of the ostentatious giant when he meandered into John’s studio during one of her sittings. Few of her father’s farces have characters even half as flamboyant, with his shock of curls, walrus mustache, and rings on every finger.

“Actions speak louder than words.” Elizabeth nods at Marie-Anne, who is kissing Georges. “The young man is handsome, and his wit is impressive enough for Édouard to take him under his

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wing. But he's poor. Will this concern Duran? If so, he's no longer bohemian. And since he's yet to reach the pinnacle he aspires to, he's merely bourgeois."

I blanch because what she says is true. "That fate would break his heart!"

"Will yours be broken if your paintings go no further than your parlor wall?" she asks.

I can't remember a time when my thumb's touch against a brush's bristles didn't make my heart swell with joy. I take pride in turning a dab of oil on canvas into the image of a stranger who has caught my eye. Yes, I love painting—as much as I love music. I once thought I'd be a concert pianist, but Mother felt Dresden was out of reach.

She would undoubtedly respond likewise to the expense of studying at an atelier.

My answer is barely a whisper: "I have obligations."

Elizabeth's eyes turn to Mother: the lively hostess attending to our guests' needs.

How do I explain that John embodies Mother's lifelong goal, that she finds no need to exert any more effort or money on one whose prospects are already dimmed?

Better I should appreciate John's opportunities and accept my place as supplicant: to him and Mother, whose long-fought strategy made his success possible.

"Your only obligation is to yourself, Emily. Every parent understands this."

I agree with a sigh. John is just now recouping my parents' investment in him.

Still, I must try. Otherwise, I'll spend my life regretting never having done so.

My face must reflect my resolve because Elizabeth offers her hand in support. "Shall we join the others?"

The applause to Gabriel's finale has my sleeping father bolting unsteadily from his armchair. Seeing this, I reach over to steady him.

Bone-weary, Father accepts my kindness by patting my hand. After settling him in his chair again, he murmurs, "Is this how our lives are to be henceforth?"

I hold back from answering. What can I say that will comfort him? He's proud of his only living son. And yet, sadness permeates the air around him. Whereas John's victory has the rest of his family frantic with excitement about the future, it has had the opposite effect on our patriarch.

While Vi, Mother, John, and I have no problem talking to strangers—and often eagerly accept many as life-long friends when our paths cross in cities frequented by both—Father merely resigns himself to their encroachment. His sole connection to the life he misses is the weekly letters

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that cross the Atlantic bearing the scrawl of his dear brothers and sister. His children may be fluent in English, Italian, and French, but we're inarticulate in the language of our father's memories. When reading our uncles' missives aloud, his words wash over us in an incomprehensible babble. His chuckles at their jokes are lost on us, as are the names that easily roll off his tongue.

We only pretend to care.

When Gabriel begins an encore, Father signals Mother to his side.

Reluctantly, she takes leave of Pauline Duran. When she reaches us, she whispers rhapsodically, "Isn't it grand?"

"Yes, b-b-but..." Warily, Father stammers, "shouldn't our guests be going?"

Mother's smile hardens. "The evening has just begun!"

"John must be tired," Father insists. "And we've yet to hear the day's highlights."

"The day is far from over for John—or me." Mother's tone sends ice through my veins. "If it's wearing on you, by all means, head off to bed." Her glare dares him to protest further.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Mary. Of course, you're right. As it is John's night, he—and you—should make the most of it since we won't see him again until Christmas."

Mother shrugs. "You and Violet will go on to Geneva without Emily and me. John needs us here for a few weeks to help him manage his new commissions. He'll join us in Venice in the fall. His new clients—the Chilean diplomat and his wife—will also be there."

Her point is made with the couple's entrance: Ramón and Amalia Subercaseaux.

Father's eyes glaze with a numbing realization: John's dreams now usurp his own.

It has been twenty-five years since Father's feet touched American soil. For him, Mother's Grand Tour wore thin long ago. Last year, she refused to include Violet and him on our journey home, claiming two additional ship fares would break us. When his accounting proved her wrong, she argued that Violet's constitution was too frail for an ocean crossing.

Now she can use John's success as the reason to keep Father on this side of the Atlantic.

It was always Mother's endgame. How could he not see it before?

As he shuffles off, I vow that Mother won't succeed in quashing my goals too.

"—saw her at the opera?" Judith Gautier is saying to John. "A vision in white, I assume."

John nods. "And the hue of her complexion..."

Ah! The subject is Madame Gautreau.

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Judith laughs. “Narrow in its range, oui? Like heliotrope when steeped in pink.”

As I take the chair beside John, he leans over to kiss my cheek. His joy is intoxicating.

“Her paramour was there too, I suppose?” Judith asks. She means Doctor Pozzi.

John grins. “I’d like to meet him.”

Judith’s eyes roam the room. “He’ll feel the same. He collects our type, you know.”

John is intrigued. “What type is that?”

“The avant-garde. Artists, actors, writers—especially if they are provocateurs.” Her sloe-eyed gaze assesses him. “Have you heard what the actress, Sarah Bernhardt, calls him?”

When John shakes his head, Judith purses her lips against the urge to giggle. “*Doctor God!*”

They chortle gleefully.

I blush at the memory of him and Madame Gautreau. “Madame Bernhardt was his lover?”

Judith smirks. “She worships at his altar still—with a true fanatic’s fervor!”

“Surely, he can’t also be having... other affairs...” My voice trails off.

“Dear Emily, the man *often* lives up to the name.” Judith winks knowingly. “And I can assure you *personally*, it’s not only with ‘the Queen of the Pose.’”

Judith too? I stifle a gasp.

John bellows raucously. Others glance our way, but only one is curious enough to venture over to find out why: Duran, who admonishes John, “A host must share his gossip.”

“I fear we’ve shocked sweet Emily,” Judith divulges. Coyly, her eyes sweep over him. “Monsieur Duran, you’re a member of le Cercle des Mirlitons, are you not?”

“But of course.” Duran preens at the mention of the exclusive private men’s club whose members are artists, writers, actors, and those who support them.

“Then confirm something I’ve heard from Samuel Pozzi.” Judith leans forward as if weighted down by her secret. “That the club has barbers—and *that they are women.*”

Duran snickers. “Pozzi lives out many fantasies there, but not that one! Still, I’m sure it will be overwhelmingly approved if he suggests it—except by the club’s male barbers.”

Judith laughs. “And I’m sure you’d readily second the motion.” Even as she puts her arm around John, her eyes caress Duran. “Speaking of the club, you should consider sponsoring John. With his star on the rise, your sun burns all the brighter. And because Samuel will enjoy basking in your glow, he’ll certainly second him.”

Duran nods excitedly at John. “I’ll introduce you to him when you return from England.”

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As he veers off, Judith winks at my brother.

I now understand their scheme: John's entrée to Madame Gautreau will be her lover.

“Madame Derode...*Madame Derode!*” Mother's shouts fall on deaf ears. Our landlady is snoring soundly in her bedroom, three stories below us.

"She complained that our guests' unwillingness to depart would leave her only a few hours of sleep before she must rise and make breakfast," I explain.

"We paid her handsomely to be at our beck and call!" Mother huffs.

Unlike me, who does so with no compensation.

Could I earn enough by painting to break from my parents? Without thought, words tumble from my mouth: "John is such an inspiration to me that I... I wish to apply to an atelier."

Mother stares at me. "Heavens!... Why?"

"Because..." Why aren't I prepared to answer this most basic of questions?

Should I say that painting makes me happy? That John, Carroll, and Elizabeth have proved a livelihood is possible? That I want out from under Mother's thumb?

Not that! Offer roses, not thorns. "You instilled in me a love for painting. Naturally, I—"

"Artistic success comes from talent and good business sense. Otherwise, half the world would be painters and the other half novelists," she scoffs. "Such a waste of canvas and paper!"

Hurt, I stammer, "But...others say I have talent! Elizabeth Gardner...and Carroll!"

Mother smirks. "I'm not surprised that Miss Gardner would suggest it. Her people had the money to send her to Paris for lessons—with a companion no less. And being Monsieur Bouguereau's protégé has placed her in the spotlight."

"Their investment wasn't wasted. She's won numerous awards and commissions."

"Carroll has yet to prove himself, but John deems him worthy," Mother admits.

"Then you agree I should apply?" My voice rises with my hope.

"I'd consent for you to take lessons from Carroll."

"He doesn't teach! Like John, he seeks commissions."

"Between them, he must eat. Besides, if it keeps him at your side, it's money well spent."

At my side. Just as Mrs. Burckhardt creates pathetic reasons to shove Louise upon John.

As if one's mere presence is intoxicating enough to breach the laws of attraction.

I mutter, "I will not insult him in that manner!"

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“In the game of love, it’s not an insult to encourage a man to take an interest in you.”

“This is not about love! And it’s not a game,” I retort. “It’s about the rest of my life.”

“John’s opportunities came at great expense. And because he rose to the occasion, perhaps we won’t now exhaust the rest of our savings.”

“I’m quite aware that, these many years, the fount of your energy—and funds—have flowed toward John. Rightly so. But does that mean the well is now dry as it pertains to me?”

Mother’s mouth opens, but no words come out. Finally: “Before we consider it, you must prove yourself worthy of our money and your instructor’s time. To compete with every other student who shows up the same day for the same stool at the same studio, you’ll need at least ten paintings—oils, watercolors—as well as a sketchbook filled with illustrations: charcoals, pastels, still-life drawings...and of the human form—men *and* women...” Her sigh implies that this quest is too daunting. “You must take your time. Choose your subjects well. Then we’ll move forward.”

When I run to hug her, a stray goblet topples off the sideboard and smashes to bits.

Perturbed, Mother grumbles, “Now we have an even bigger mess on our hands!”

I’m rarely the cause of her ire. If I am now, it was worth it.

I will have an independent future.

1881

CHAPTER 5

APRIL - PARIS

“Ah! A new watercolor!” John is looking at a painting I’d created two months ago while the family wintered in Nice. It depicts Vi sleeping on a settee: lips opened slightly and limbs akimbo, while the book she’d been reading lays on a pillow nestled in the crook of her knee. A ray of sunlight warms her tranquil face.

He takes it off the parlor wall and over to the window. As his eyes scan it, I’m nettled by doubt. He has a generous spirit with other artists, but it never extends to false flattery.

From John, more than anyone else, I require it.

The family has not seen him since Christmas. No longer anchored to the regiment of Duran’s atelier, he’s not tethered to Paris. After our fall stay in Venice, he went to Holland, where he reveled in the beauty of the Dutch masters. Our nomadism is too ingrained in him.

John may look unchanged, but to my eye, he’s different. The transformation reveals itself subtly. He’s a bit broader in the girth. And while I have no doubt that his innate shyness has not fully recessed, a steely determination brightens his eyes.

Finally, he nods. “It’s good. Your strokes are spare, yet the image has depth. And the lighting is true.”

Such details never escape him.

I’ve not yet told him about Mother’s promise. However, when I’m ready to apply to an atelier, I’ll first ask John which paintings I should take.

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In this year's Salon, John's submissions are his portraits of Amalia Subercaseaux and that of the Pailleron children. After her final sitting, the petulant Marie-Louise joined John in a celebratory upheaval of the studio. Amid shouts and jigs, furniture was overturned. Canvases were tossed about. John commemorated the event with a sketch which he inscribed:

In honor of my reconciliation with Marie-Louise.

John's friendship with the Subercaseauxs deepened during their stay in Venice. Ramón and Amalia appreciated our time showing them the Floating City's many visual delights. Upon learning of Ramón's love of painting, John invited him to share his studio at Palazzo Rezzonico.

When they weren't at their easels, the Subercaseauxs joined us in exploring the canals via gondola. On one outing, Ramón painted John, who returned the favor. Despite Ramón's sheepish admission that Amalia insisted John paint her at the embassy because of the slovenly state of John's studio, my brother is unabashedly fond of the subject and her husband.

John now asks, "Are you ready for the Subercaseauxs' dinner?"

I sigh. "I suppose."

Tonight is the unveiling of John's portrait of Amalia. Tomorrow it will be hung during the Salon's Varnishing Day. Mother, Father, and I are on the guest list.

I'm sure Mother passed along the dressmaker's bill to John, knowing he would pay it gladly. I find nothing more humiliating than a seamstress' first gawk, followed by a grimace as she realizes the daunting task before her. I pity her even more than she does me.

"You'll never guess who else is attending," John declares.

"Don't leave me in suspense."

"The Gautreaus." He smiles triumphantly.

"At your behest?"

John shakes his head. "Remember, the husband, Pedro, imports his bat *merde* from Chile. Maybe Ramón wants to show his appreciation to Gautreau for ridding the country of it."

I laugh. "Giving you a reason to be thankful too. Perhaps Monsieur Gautreau will be so impressed with Amalia's portrait that he'll consider having his wife sit for you."

"I hope so. Alas, my hunt for Doctor Pozzi has been for naught. Duran has hosted me twice at Des Mirlitons. Both times, the good doctor was elsewhere."

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“I imagine Pozzi is a much-desired guest with the hoi polloi.” I put my painting back on the wall. “As for tonight, I doubt he’ll be around to distract Madame Gautreau. That way, you have time to charm both her and her husband.”

In joyous anticipation of what the night will hold, John goes to the piano, where he plucks out a tune.

“What is that song?” I ask.

“I heard it while out and about last night with the others.”

“Is Ralph in town already?”

“Yes, and Edward. Carroll too. Édouard Manet joined us but only after we agreed to stop at the Folies Bergère first.”

I chuckle. “So, that’s where you learned this song.” John idolizes Manet. For the privilege of being in the artist’s presence, he’d have followed him to the ends of the Earth.

“Édouard wasn’t there for the dancing.” John doesn’t look at the keyboard yet continues playing. “The whole time, he stared at the barmaid.”

“A *woman* was behind the bar?”

John chortles at my shock. “It’s a thing now. I can see why. The clubs sell more drinks.”

“Then Judith Gautier’s prediction for Des Mirlitons—that its barbers will soon be women—may come to pass after all!” I stop myself from teasing John that he may have found Pozzi there had he searched hard enough. “Perhaps Monsieur Manet has found a new muse.”

“Perhaps,” John concedes. “And yet, one can’t help but feel sorry for the poor girl.” By shifting into a minor key, the tune becomes Chopin’s *Funeral March*. “Not because Manet is enthralled with her. I’m sure she’ll be flattered when he finally asks to paint her. Perhaps even relieved to break the monotony, no less the tension.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just think, Emily: only a counter stands between the barmaid and the club’s thirsty patrons. It can’t stop the leers and lascivious propositions that come her way. The poor thing is resigned to it.”

Is it so unpleasant to be desired? What shame is there in a stranger’s adoring gaze or admiring remark? I imagine these sensations, unprompted—even unwelcomed—would be thrilling.

John returns to the light-hearted ditty. When forgetting its lyrics, he tests viable substitutions.

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By the time we leave, John will have perfected his performance. Our hosts may ask him to play. Amalia also plays, and beautifully so. He used the Subercaseauxs' piano as a prop in her portrait, posing her seated in front of the keyboard but angled so that viewers might easily assume she is aware of their arrival and has turned to greet them. The gown Amalia wears is white satin with gauzy flounces. Its black embellishments—the jacket's satin shawl collar, the cuffs of its fluted sleeves, and the lace flourishes on its front panel—dare one's eye to focus beyond the bright red orchid pinned where the bodice meets a single row of black buttons.

By drawing the allusion between the artist and his subject, John has one more way to impress Madame Gautreau.

The Subercaseauxs live on Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. Usually, John is punctual. But tonight, we're arriving late. When Mother chides him as to why he shrugs. "Isn't that what one does when one is the guest of honor?"

"I suppose," Mother's frown proves she's not convinced.

My guess: John doesn't want to cede the honor of a grand entrance to Madame Gautreau.

A servant opens the door and leads us to a spacious salon. The Subercaseauxs' apartment is large and sumptuously appointed as befitting the most fashionable street in Paris. Its furnishings are either gilded in bronze, marble-topped, or veneers. But to mitigate the style that John has teasingly dubbed "from the attic of the Versailles," the vibrant colors are reminiscent of our hosts' native Chile. Its cobalt lagoons, limy green Diamondhead ferns, and the scarlet heads of its native Magellanic woodpeckers are reflected in the suite's floral wallpaper, fabrics, and tapestries.

Ramón welcomes us heartily, then introduces us to the cluster of guests nearest him. John shakes hands, but his eyes scan the room. He's good at hiding his disappointment that Madame Gautreau is not among them.

What he fails to notice is that Pierre Gautreau is here.

The man recedes into the background of this lively party: an easy trick since there is nothing ostentatious about him. His suit is well-made but fitted poorly to his barrel-chested physique. His close-cropped beard obscures but doesn't conceal a face of common features: eyes too small, a nose too sharp, a mouth turned down on either side and a melancholy air as if he already knows he is that man at every party who offers too little in the way of conversation.

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My father also accepts this role. And yet, both men are married to women who crave society and treat every soirée as a stage with an audience.

Long ago, these husbands gave up any expectation that their wives were satisfied with their plaudits alone.

Monsieur Gautreau turns to examine Amalia's portrait, which sits on an easel near the piano. To my dismay, he gives it a cursory glance, no more.

I take this to mean that he doesn't like it. If so, I'd find that very sad. John painted Amalia as he knows her: kind, open, and guileless. She's a beautiful woman and a gracious hostess, though she doesn't embody the superior air or mystique of Amélie Gautreau.

Perhaps it was foolish for John to expect Monsieur Gautreau to be enthralled with the likeness of a woman who pales when compared to his wife.

Just as John frees himself from one set of admirers, a new group inundates him with their praise of the painting. In the meantime, Ramón has walked over to Monsieur Gautreau. While I listen with one ear as Amalia reminisces with my parents on their walks over Venice's bridges, my other ear tunes in to Ramón's conversation with Monsieur Gautreau: a surprisingly animated discussion on differences in the arbitrage laws between their two countries.

In time, Amalia takes John's arm and leads us into the dining room. Ramón escorts Mother. Father walks with me. The other guests also walk in pairs.

Because his wife is absent, Monsieur Gautreau walks alone.

As the guest of honor, John is placed to the right of Amalia.

Mother sits to Ramón's right.

I sit to our host's left, as does Father to Amalia.

Monsieur Gautreau sits beside me.

Mother regales Ramón with her consensus of the opera that opened at La Fenice after the Subercaseauxs departed from the Italian city he insists he already misses. It would be rude to ignore Monsieur Gautreau since neither of us is otherwise engaged.

Say something...

But words fail me. If we were already acquainted, I'd know his interests and could use one to begin a conversation. Had he been conversing with the guest on his other side, I might have gleaned enough on some subject to engage him.

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It's a shame he showed no interest in Amalia's portrait! Otherwise, I'd have the perfect entree: John's approach to his subjects and the joy he takes in his work.

Perhaps it's better to say nothing about John than the wrong thing.

I pray my face doesn't reflect my helplessness.

As Amalia's eyes roam around the table, she leans toward him. I presume they're discussing the other guests. I'm too far away to hear her murmurs, but when her eyes alight on Monsieur Gautreau, her lips form his name. Following Amalia's gaze, John gawks as she imparts this information, only to grimace at the missed opportunity of speaking with him before now. But then he sees me. Under the assumption that all is not lost, he smiles encouragingly.

I go frigid from fear. What if I fail as his advocate?

My God, I must say something...

Just as I turn to Monsieur Gautreau, a butler places the first course, turtle soup, in front of me. Surprised, I drop my napkin to the floor. As I reach for it, Monsieur Gautreau does too. He finds it first and hands it to me.

Before I can thank him, he says, "Mademoiselle Sargent, *oui*?"

"*Oui*, Monsieur Gautreau."

His lips lift into a smile, but his eyes stay sad. "Please, call me Pierre."

"Oh!... But Amalia called you Pedro—"

"A name I use with my Chilean business associates. It's appreciated, but..." He shrugs.

"I understand. One's ideal of oneself must always take precedent. Pierre it is. And you must call me Emily."

Hearing my name, he grimaces. "I have an 'Emily' of my own."

"Yes, your lovely wife." Her snide remark at my expense comes to mind. Still, I attempt a smile. "Is she here tonight, sir?"

"She had a previous engagement. It's for the best. She resents any need to apologize."

Puzzled, I ask, "To our hosts? Why would that have been necessary?"

"Not to them. To you."

"Me? ... but... why?"

"At last year's Salon, Amélie was callous with her remarks on your behalf. Do you remember having overheard it?"

Does he expect me to admit she cut me deeply, that her indifference shamed me?

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To my dismay, the concern on his face must mirror the pain he sees in mine. “You’ll be doing me a kindness if you can excuse her.”

Mollified, I nod. “Your acknowledgment is salvo enough.”

“I’m glad.”

His smile beckons me to divulge: “Sir, in Madame Gautreau’s defense, I’ve noticed that no matter their fortunes—be it money, beauty, or luck—those who have so much seem oblivious to those who could use more of the same.”

“An astute observation, especially in Amélie’s case. Her riches are many. In contrast, her sensibilities are few.” His crisp tone reinforces his disappointment.

I look down at my steaming soup. As much as I appreciate Pierre’s honesty, I’m failing at my mission to lead him into a discussion about John.

Then I remember the fond look he gave Amalia. Nonchalantly, I say, “John enjoyed tremendously the opportunity to paint Madame Subercaseaux.”

“An exacting likeness,” Pierre exclaims. “He captured her delicate features. More importantly, he allows the viewer to see the light within her soul.”

“Yes, exactly!” Awed by his insightfulness, I add, “It is John’s gift.”

“A rare one indeed. I saw it in the Moroccan painting as well. The look in your eyes” — Pierre hesitates— “in the subject’s eyes, the desire was...*heartbreaking*.”

Does Pierre see my blush? Thankfully, he stares away.

Emboldened, I say, “John would be honored to paint your wife. He admires her greatly.”

At first, Pierre says nothing. When turns to face me, he says, “Amélie is nothing like Amalia... Or you.”

Shamed, I reply, “Of course. You’re right. Your wife is a...a strange, wondrous creature.”

Pierre stares at me, taken aback by the phrase I’ve mimicked from John. “It’s true. She is beguiling—which is why every artist in town has asked to paint her.”

“And she has turned them all down?”

“No. I have.”

Incredulous, I ask, “Why?”

“It would be a waste of the artist’s time and my money.”

“Monsieur...I don’t understand.”

He looks down at his soup. “Amélie could never be happy with any portrait.”

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Is she really that vain?

Intuiting my vexation, Pierre explains, “Amélie equates adoration with love. When her youth and beauty fade, she will not feel adored. A portrait will always remind her of her loss.”

“I see it differently,” I insist. “Through it, Amélie will always be at her most beautiful.”

He laughs mirthlessly. “If only you knew her as I do. The artist would find it a frustrating experience, and not just because she’d be bored with the process.”

I see that John caught Pierre’s chortle. He’ll be frustrated to learn that I’ve botched my chance to win over Pierre to his cause.

My attempt to counter Pierre’s presumption is interrupted by the butlers who take away our soup bowls, replacing them with our entrées. This pause is long enough for Ramón to turn to me and say, “Emily, Madame Sargent has informed me that your cousins will continue to use Venice’s Palazzo Barbaro as their home base in Europe...”

In the time I can assure him this is the case, Pierre has been engaged by the woman on his right.

Their conversation lasts for the rest of our meal.

Afterward, he takes his leave. Our hostess is dismayed. No more than me.

Throughout the rest of the evening, John, Amalia, and I take turns entertaining the others with lively piano recitals, ending in one which they play together, as they’d done frequently in Venice. Even as applause and laughter fill the room, John’s face is impassive.

The audience he craved most is not here.

Greatly disappointed, he says nothing on the way home.

Wisely, John waits until our parents go to bed before asking: “What did you say to Pierre?”

“He spoke first...” Flustered, I add: “To apologize.”

John’s jaw drops open. “Whatever for?”

“For... Amélie’s behavior.”

“You mean her absence this evening?”

“No. Pierre said she had a prior engagement.”

“He said the same to Amalia.” John shrugs. “Go on.”

“He meant for...for her cruel remark at last year’s Salon.”

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John is so surprised that he sits down. “She spoke to you last year? Why have you never said anything?”

I wince at the memory. “It was...hurtful.”

John takes my hand. “What did she say?”

“Monsieur Gautreau complimented *Fumée d’ ambre gris*. He appreciated how you painted my...*the subject’s* hands. Violet proclaimed that they were mine. Madame Gautreau observed that the subject’s headdress was probably added to disguise ...my back.”

John blanches.

“I told him I appreciated his apology and immediately turned the conversation to your delight in painting Amalia. He too considers her a dear friend.”

John nods. Color rises in his cheeks again. “Emmy, had I known...” His voice trails off.

I squeeze his hand as thanks for the sentiment, but I know better. Even if John had heard her, it would not stop him from pursuing the most celebrated woman in Paris for the honor of painting her: an act that would secure his reputation as one of the finest portraitists in Europe.

I can’t say this to him because he wouldn’t be able to deny it. And what kind of brother would that make him?

“It doesn’t matter, Johnny. Pierre feels that having Amélie sit for a portrait would waste his money and the artist’s time.”

“That is ludicrous!”

“I agree with you and said as much. Unfortunately, Monsieur Gautreau adamantly does not. He claims she wouldn’t appreciate the artist’s effort, or worse yet, the result.”

“He doesn’t know his wife as well as he thinks,” John huffs. “She revels in adoration. A Salon portrait is an ultimate spotlight. If it wins a prize, she has a chance at *immortality*.”

I start to tell him that Pierre said those exact words, but the look on his face stops me. I know it well enough.

John will not be dismissed.

CHAPTER 6

EARLY JUNE - PARIS

“So sorry, dear Sargents, for our tardiness! Our social obligations are many, and our hosts find it so difficult to part with dear Louise.” As Mrs. Burckhardt enters John’s studio, her fan flutters furiously as if it were possible to stir up a breeze and simultaneously shoo away John’s annoyance.

Her daughter has many faults, but the ability to hide a falsehood is not one of them. Louise’s flaming cheeks are the telltale proof. I purse my lips to keep from laughing. If she were truly popular and suitors so plentiful, her mother wouldn’t be working so hard to entice John to ask for her hand in marriage.

Now that this year’s Salon has ended and most of John’s patrons have left the city’s stifling heat for their summer homes, John is living up to his promise to paint Louise. Already, he’s regretting it. He assumed he’d dash through the assignment, but Mrs. Burckhardt is foiling his scheme. She’s under the assumption that John’s feelings for Louise will grow exponentially with the number of sittings it takes to complete the task.

John had hoped my presence would relieve Mrs. Burckhardt from the obligation of chaperoning Louise. He was wrong. I find it tiresome. Mother would be an apt substitute, but John insists the combination of both women would be horrific.

Admittedly, he is right. Though Mother would never take up Mrs. Burckhardt’s cause, how she would refute it could cost John dearly: not just in future commissions from the Burckhardts but with others in the expatriate circles we hold dear.

Instead, John ignores Mrs. Burckhardt’s lie and beckons them in.

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Relieved that he doesn't hold her mother's sins against her, Louise smiles gratefully and hands me her tulle cloak. Her dress is black satin with a full skirt. Its décolletage, cloaked in the tulle sewn into its square neckline, rises into a flared collar. Tulle also cuffs the garment's sleeves. Its front panel sports a row of large satin bows. After a cursory glance in the studio's full-length mirror, Louise moves in front of John's easel and takes up the pose he insists on: arms bent, one hand on her hip, the other holding a single rose.

Throughout these sittings, the poor girl's tight smile quivers. Whether it's because these sessions are tiring or that John's presence sends her into emotional toil, I cannot say. More than likely, her mother's blatant attempts at matchmaking are as embarrassing to her as they are for us.

While comparing Louise's pose with the one on his canvas, John roams between his easel and his subject. As is her habit, Mrs. Burckhardt takes every step with him. Whenever he touches the daughter—pats down an errant tendril, straightens a pleat in her skirt, shifts her hand a mere inch—the mother grunts approvingly.

In time, John settles in front of the easel. Finally, Mrs. Burckhardt takes her place on the settee. This is my cue to heat the kettle.

By the time the tea is steeping in its pot, the inevitable happens:

"She is... *just ravishing!*" Mrs. Burckhardt feels her exclamations always bear repeating. Her flattery is not aimed at Louise but at John. She feels it will drive him to perform a miracle: create a portrait that catapults her daughter into Paris's beau monde.

Granted, if anyone can accomplish this miracle, it will be John.

I wait for the hesitation that invariably follows Mrs. Burckhardt's accolades (a full ten seconds) and then the inevitable conjunction: "*However...*"

The word drags the pause behind it like a stubborn puppy who refuses to be coaxed from his cozy home for a walk in a rainstorm.

Without fail, John hardens into stone. His paintbrush pauses in anticipation of the suggestion that Mrs. Burckhardt is sure to express.

"It's just..." She sighs to indicate that she is torn between continuing or stifling the urge to do so. She's never stopped before. I don't anticipate this time will be any different.

The twitch in John's right eye indicates he realizes this too.

Finally: "...*that rose.*" When John says nothing, she prods, "Must the blossom be *yellow?*"

"Yes." John's tone indicates that the subject is closed.

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Mrs. Burckhardt’s eyelids flutter in consternation. “I worry it implies bad luck.”

As if talking to a child, John firmly says, “In fact, it indicates friendship. Felicity—”

“Not in America! I forgive your lack of knowledge of your native land, Mr. Sargent, only if it doesn’t reflect poorly on our darling Louise.” Her ominous tone dares him to deny it. “Perhaps a *white* rose? To emphasize her innocence. You’ve mentioned finding it endearing.”

I remember all the times John has merely tolerated Louise. I tremble while holding in a giggle, causing the tea poured for Mrs. Burckhardt to splash out of the cup and onto its saucer. As quickly as possible, I sop up the spilled tea with a towel, then hand the cup to Mrs. Burckhardt with a generous portion of freshly baked torte.

Because her mother forbids her sweets, I must now endure Louise’s mournful gaze. During Louise’s last sitting, when John left the studio for a moment to pay a tradesman, Louise took the occasion to pop a macaron in her mouth. Mrs. Burckhardt insisted she spit it out, hissing, “Sweets are a privilege only married women can afford!” Her own plumpness is proof.

To break the silence between the artist and the subject’s proxy, I exclaim, “Mrs. Burckhardt, you’d asked about the Salon’s Second-Class medal. I am happy to report that it has been finally settled—in Madame Subercaseaux’s favor, I might add.”

As I’d hoped, she finds this tidbit too tantalizing to ignore. “As it should be! It was wrong of that pompous playwright to bribe the judges with the argument that the prize should be awarded to the painting of his two brats—just because they are French, and she is not. I am happy for John that the judges did not fall for the ploy.”

Whereas I blanch at her description of Édouard Pailleron, John accepts her compliment with a shrug. Either way, the prize was his. Édouard was appeased by the critics’ ecstatic praise for the picture.

Noting my chagrin, Mrs. Burckhardt adds: “He’s quite rude! Do you know he has never responded to a *carte de visit* for my Thursday salons?”

John chuckles. “He has a good excuse. Like all theatre folk, he rarely rises before dusk.”

“Ah! Well ...” Unconvinced, she huffs, “Perhaps it’s for the best. To be honest, I find his little comedies incomprehensible.”

“He wouldn’t be coming to perform, Mama,” Louise points out.

“He might if he had enough wine in him.” John’s smirk undercuts his sincerity.

Mrs. Burckhardt stops chewing her torte to gauge if John is making fun of her or Édouard.

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But before I can say something, she frets: “John, must you go to London?”

John’s canvas hides his grimace from her but not me. “Yes, if I’m to exhibit at the Royal Academy.”

I don’t know how he keeps his voice devoid of any annoyance.

“When did you say you shall return?” she asks.

“Late July.”

“Excellent! Louise and I are hosting Edward’s nieces, Paulette, and Jeanine, on a trip to Fontainebleau.” She leans in as if divulging some grand secret. “Carroll has already agreed to accompany us. Surely, you’ll join us too.”

Fontainebleau is a favorite jaunt of John’s. In the hope that he’ll find the offer irresistible, she uses Carroll’s attendance as an incentive, just as Louise’s cousins are bait for Carroll.

“I’d be honored,” John replies. As his eyes move from mother to daughter, he shares his grin with both. The elder Burckhardt preens while the younger one blushes.

John sighs at Louise’s change in pallor. With brush now paused, he turns to me. “Will you be back in time to join us, Emily?”

Mrs. Burckhardt stares at me as if she’d forgotten I’m in the room. When she realizes I’m gazing back, she peruses her cup with the same intensity of a fortuneteller reading tea leaves.

I’d be an unwanted hanger-on. This doesn’t surprise me.

She’d never believe I’d find her company even more annoying. I resist the impulse to snort—only because John needs the commission.

Sweetly, I reply, “I doubt I’ll be back in time, Brother. Have you forgotten that Mother is meeting me in Liverpool, where we’re to sail to America?” Smiling coyly, I turn to Mrs. Burckhardt. “We’re spending time with our uncle and aunt in Saratoga Springs. The mineral water has a soothing effect on Mother’s rheumatism.”

I’m relieved to have an excuse. Not that the American trip will be much better. I know my mother well enough to see my role in the journey: that of an unpaid companion—attending with pursers, the carriages, and our luggage—and as her nursemaid during her treatments, which include twice-daily baths.

Even if I were compensated, the experience would be just as hollow. If history is any indication, our relative’s conversations will stop when I enter the room. In its place will be all I

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dread: pitying glances, clucking tongues, and condescending remarks that greet every woman in her twenties with no dowry to offset her age—and, in my case, an obvious deformity.

Mother finds no better opportunity to turn the conversation to John’s successes.

Doesn’t she realize I’ll make her proud once I’m at an atelier? More reason I must convince her of this.

John frowns. “Emily, I thought your trip wasn’t until the week after I return from Paris.”

“Before Mother arrives, Vernon Lee and I are visiting Hampton Court Palace,” I remind him.

Disappointed, John shrugs. Mother knows he’s not enthralled with America. At least he has the excuse of the Burckhardt commission to avoid the trip this time.

I don’t envy him this alternative. In fact, I’d go so far as to wager he’ll regret it.

In hushed tones, Louise warns, “I’ve heard the palace is haunted!”

“It’s why Vernon wishes to go,” I explain. “She’s working on a ghost story.”

Mrs. Burckhardt arches a brow. “She’s a strange one.”

Though aggravated, I calmly ask, “In what way?”

“Her manner of dress is...*unnatural*.”

She refers to Vernon’s propensity to dress like a man.

I shrug. “All creative types are eccentric. I take it as a sign that Vernon will be regarded as an exceptional storyteller someday.”

I also find it odd. But my friend is too dear to me to question her antics, let alone agree with her detractor.

John promises me: “We’ll trade tales when we meet up.”

I continue to serve tea, holding Louise’s cup to her lips so she can take sips while John continues to paint her.

All the while, Mrs. Burckhardt stares smugly at me.

At least the issue with the rose is forgotten—for now, anyway.

CHAPTER 7

LATE JUNE - LONDON

“**Vernon, tilt your head** a bit to the right,” John insists.

Exasperated, our oldest and dearest friend chuckles. “Twin, nothing short of my donning a mask will improve your sketch of me. Certainly not a coquettish pose.”

John concedes with a sigh. With a face too long, a jaw too square, a nose too straight, and eyes that protrude out too far, there is little he can do to soften her homely features.

Despite this, our trip to London has been blissful. Vernon Lee is our sister: if not by blood, then by heart and soul.

While in London, she is the house guest of the poetess Mary Robinson and her family. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and Mary’s sister, Mabel, are pleasant enough. But there is a frost between them and Vernon.

Mary seems oblivious to it. Pretty and sweetly demure, her most redeeming quality is her tendency to ask insightful questions and listen with such intensity that you feel you’re the most important person in the world. For John, the topic is his love of the artist Frans Hals, whose paintings he wishes to study further. For me, it’s my memories of Florence, which she hopes to visit again.

I understand why Vernon cherishes her friendship.

The letters sent during the nine years since we last saw her were merely spindly bridges barely spanning currents of our lives. Long-lived friendships thrive on heartfelt conversations and shared experiences. To that end, John is right to memorialize this long-awaited reunion in a sketch.

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As his project grows from mere outline to fine-lined illustration, I realize that since we last saw our friend, much has changed, yet nothing at all. The adventurous girl with a vivid imagination has been replaced by a flamboyant bon vivant who wears trousers and has cropped hair.

Like me, John takes this in stride. I assume he recognizes Vernon's need to invent a persona that complements her artistic endeavors.

In time, John's illustration is transformed into a portrait in oils.

"Mere dabs and blurs—considerably caricatured," Vernon declares. "But certainly, more like me than I expected. Rather fierce and cantankerous."

"Succinctly you," Mary insists.

"I agree wholeheartedly," Mr. Robinson mutters.

Vernon rolls her eyes.

Thankfully, Mr. Robinson doesn't see this because he's leading the way to the dining room, where lunch is served.

"Where are you staying?" Mrs. Robinson asks us.

"Eaton Terrace," John responds. "We're guests of Joseph Farquharson while he tours Egypt."

"Joseph studied with John at Carolus-Duran's atelier," I add.

John has the entire run of Joseph's studio. By way of thanks, John is painting Poppy Graeme, the niece of Joseph's stepmother.

"Is your friend related to Robert Farquharson, the parliamentarian who is also the laird of Finzean?" Mr. Robinson asks.

John nods. "Brothers."

"In fact, John just accepted Dr. Farquharson's commission," I say proudly.

Impressed, the Robinsons nod in unison.

Vernon smirks at this.

"The Sargents missed you awfully in Venice," John chides her. "You would have reveled in knowing the Subercaseauxs."

Vernon chuckles. "Sorry. Happily, I *was* already reveling in my acquaintances here."

John laughs at this comeuppance.

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On the other hand, Mary blushes. Indeed, as a dear friend of Vernon's, Mary is now used to her sly asides. I'm beginning to think she is even shyer than me.

Vernon quizzes John about the gypsies he'd met while in Spain who inspired *El Jaleo*. He's determined to finish it so he may exhibit it in next year's Salon.

As much a master at painting pictures with words as with oils or watercolours, John excitedly describes the vibrant pigments he uses to bring the painting to life. He does his best to characterize the music that sets his subject on fire. When words fail him, he rushes to the piano and serenades us with a flamenco.

John ends the song with a flourish. While everyone applauds, Vernon smiles supremely.

After the meal, except for Mary, the rest of the Robinsons take their leave.

I'm assured we've left them with a good impression when Vernon mutters, "Mary's parents may consider her friendship with me worthy after all."

John guffaws. "I don't know why they'd think otherwise."

"Let's just say I'm an acquired taste." Vernon turns to Mary. "Wouldn't you agree?"

If she means it as a jest, Mary misses the humor. She drops her gaze to her lap.

"I know how you may thank us," John replies. "We're expected at the Grosvenor Gallery for a reception celebrating the exhibition of Edward Burne Jones's painting, *The Mill*."

Mary's eyes shine brightly. "How awfully jolly! Ned and his wife, Georgiana, regularly attend my parents' salons. Dante Rossetti and Evelyn Pickering are also exhibiting there."

John rises. "Then it's settled. Shall we hail a carriage?"

"**The men are nude**, but the women are not," Vernon sounds truly surprised. "Quite a change of pace for Ned, especially since he's painted his lover into the picture."

We are standing in the Grosvenor's largest chamber, where *The Mill* is on display. Ned and Georgiana are conversing with Dante, Evelyn, John, and Mary—thankfully, too far away to have heard Vernon.

I stare at the painting. While the naked men on a river's far bank dry themselves after their swim, three women dance together on the bank closest to the viewer. Vernon nods toward a fourth woman set apart from the others. Haloed in a light that draws one's eye, her sadness seems to be the result of her exclusion.

"She is a Greek woman named Mary Zambaco," Vernon divulges.

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“And Georgiana knew of the affair?” I ask.

“How could she not?” Vernon shrugs. “Their crowd—Ned’s best friend, William Morris, his wife, Janey, and their mentor, Dante—is an intimate one. Georgie cried on Bill’s shoulder about it, and Janey’s affair with Dante is an open secret. She is both men’s muse and model.” She grins. “Not that I blame them for their infatuation. Even in middle age, she has a delicious beauty. She could easily be a character in a book.”

“It’s over now between Ned and the Zambaco woman?”

“Yes, for some years. It was a notorious scandal. The press crucified Ned. He lost numerous commissions, and the Old Water-Colour Society asked him to remove this painting from its show. She threw herself into Regent’s Canal when he tried to end the affair.”

“My God!” The thought sends a shiver through me.

Does their love still haunt Ned? If so, how does Georgiana live with that knowledge?

A thought comes to me. “But his painting was recently completed. Did Madame Zambaco not die after all?”

“She lives, but he followed through on cutting her loose. I assume he paints her from memory.” With a scornful snicker, she adds, “In any event, granting penance did nothing to dampen Ned’s tendency toward infatuations. Yet another reason to expect little from men.”

“Don’t sound so jaded, Vernon,” I exclaim. “You’re certainly worthy of love.”

She laughs raucously. “I’d never question *that*.” Suddenly, she kisses my cheek. “Sweet Emily. Your innocence is refreshing.”

At that moment, Mary and John glance over. From their astonished gazes, I gather that they are also taken aback by Vernon’s impulsive act.

“We should join the others,” I murmur.

Vernon nods. As she starts toward them, I realize I’m touching my cheek.

John eyes me strangely. But then Ned asks something. He turns to answer.

I’m beginning to agree with John that one can endure only so much of Vernon’s candor.

“**Mary mentioned that** you’re also a painter.” Evelyn’s matter-of-fact tone startles me.

I have no formal education. I’ve never exhibited anywhere, let alone sold a painting. Would it be a lie to embrace the assumption?

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Instead, I'll say what I feel in my heart: "Yes. That is, I love to paint." Hesitantly, I add, "I live to paint. I plan to start my formal studies soon."

She smiles. "Which atelier?"

"Well..." I shrug. "John attended Carolus-Duran's atelier. But monsieur does not accept women."

"A fool with an ego," Evelyn scoffs. "Sadly, too few take on women. And we foreigners are scrutinized all the harder. "There is Académie Julian, of course. But the fee, already exorbitant, is double that for its female students. Better yet, consider Académie Colarossi. The tuition is much more reasonable, and Monsieur Colarossi treats women respectfully." She pauses in thought. "While you're here, you must tour the Royal Female School of Art."

Excitedly, I exclaim, "I will then... That is if I can do so tomorrow. After that, I'll be in the north country before sailing to America."

"Come as my guest," Evelyn suggests. "I'm instructing a class on the human figure."

"So, you'd recommend the school?"

Her upper lip curls into a sneer. "Heavens, no! It serves only as a comparison of where you *mustn't* study. There, female pupils aren't allowed to view a naked body. The school feels it may sully their delicate sensibilities. Instead, the model is clothed in a sheet, or the students study a sculpture. Afterward, we shall stop by Louise Jopling's studio. Besides painting and exhibiting her own works, she welcomes other women to paint there. The camaraderie is quite exhilarating!"

My heart swells. "I'd appreciate that."

"Good, then." Evelyn leans in. "A word of caution, my dear. If indeed you make a go of it, don't be disappointed if your commissions are a pittance compared to your brother's. Even if your talents are similar, he'll always be paid more. Sadly, it's the way of the world."

She is amused by the fervency of my nod, not realizing that acceptance into their world would be payment enough—

For now.

The path to my independence is suddenly clear. I must take the necessary steps to gain admission to an atelier. When I do, Mother and Father will realize that my talent matches my desire to cease being their financial burden.

"Thoughts?" John's question comes after we've waved goodbye to Vernon and Mary.

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“About Vernon? Nothing has changed between us three.”

“For the most part, I agree. But...” John pauses. Finally: “I was surprised at her *esthetic* proclivities.”

I shrug. “Granted, her attitudes are pronounced. She’s a writer, after all. I assume she lives to provoke others.”

“True. But...it’s more than that. She is—”

“Let me guess. You found Vernon more willful than you’d remembered. Perhaps even caustic. Yes, I did too. But that’s to be expected from a...a...” Now I am at a loss for the right word.

“A lesbian.” Thankfully, John’s mutter can barely be heard above the clatter of carriages and conversations around us.

“What?” I know the term, but I’ve never considered it concerning Vernon. Confused, I stutter, “I—I was going to say... a *bluestocking*.”

John looks away, embarrassed.

Mrs. Burckhardt’s derisive comment about Vernon’s mannish way of dress comes back to me. The thought that such a silly woman could turn John against our dear friend makes me angry. Poor Vernon easily fosters disapproval without suffering sly asides from others, especially someone as dear to her as John.

“It doesn’t upset you—her predilection?” he asks.

I scoff. “We have no proof of it.”

John stares at me. “Is it not obvious? Did you not see her tenderness toward Mary?”

“Wasn’t she just as tender to me? Or, for that matter, toward you?” I retort. “Since childhood, you’ve called each other ‘Twin.’ Don’t we know her as well as we know each other?”

John’s mouth opens before shutting just as quickly. “I... think I do.”

The world seems to have gone silent around us.

If John were to disregard Vernon’s friendship, no doubt Mother and Father would too.

Despite this, I would not consider doing likewise. My reason is selfish. As John’s world expands, mine stays stagnant. Should he find our old friend’s proclivities too odd and freeze her out, I have one less person who accepts me unconditionally, as I do her.

Finally, John mutters, “Even all these years past, she knows us too well.”

“Is that a problem?”

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John shrugs. “Unlike us, Vernon relishes untoward attention.”

“Admittedly, her manner is sarcastic. But friendship is the deepest form of love, is it not?”

John shakes his head. “Sweet sister, you only see what you want.”

“I could say the same of you, Johnny.”

He winces. Rarely do I use his childhood name in reproach.

“Some find such sensibilities obscene. Abhorrent, even,” John says. “Were my assumption about her correct, can you honestly say that it wouldn’t change your feelings toward her?”

“Yes.” Even to my ears, the answer sounds weak. Shaking my head, I reply again, firmly: “Of course, I would still consider her my sister. Nothing could alter my affection for her, just as nothing could change anything between you and me.”

John’s head jerks back as if I’d slapped him. Finally, resignedly, he nods. “Mother will be here after you return from your visit to Hampton Court Palace with Vernon...and Mary.”

“I shan’t see you until you return from Fontainebleau. Give the Burckhardts my best.”

“Ah...yes.” I would have assumed my sarcasm was lost on him except for his sorrowful smile. Is he reconsidering his stance on Vernon or his forced holiday?

Both, I hope.

I’ll be back in Paris a week before he returns from the excursion. During that time, his studio will be mine. I shall use it wisely: painting in solitude, with no distractions.

At this point, no one can stop me from my goals except myself.

CHAPTER 8

LATE JULY - PARIS

I've guessed wrongly that the carriage driver who brought me from the train station was robust enough to carry my trunks up the stairwell to John's studio. Instead, he lugs them up each flight just one step at a time. With each thump, he gives an indignant grunt.

The decision to stay here upon my return from America rather than John's rooms at Madame Derode's is sound. With John away, I'll spend my time painting.

I'll also avoid the pitying glances my disfigurement invariably garners from her other guests.

Evelyn Pickering was right. Louise Joplin's London studio crackled with the collective energy of all she welcomed with open arms, including me. What was once her home's parlor is now her atelier. It is large but not messy like John's—an impressive feat, considering how many join her, some intermittently and others daily, their easels and chairs scattered throughout the large sunny room. As the women paint, they chatter gaily, discussing the day's important news in between strokes of their brushes on canvas.

How I long to join such a sisterhood of creative bliss!

As I'd predicted, the American excursion with Mother only reinforced my resolve to support myself. We met up with my Uncle Gorham and Aunt Caroline in New York and then took the train to Saratoga Springs. The only advantage of such an interminable ride was that I had much time to draw. Watching as I sketched my napping uncle, Aunt Caroline whispered, "Such talent you have, Emily! Are you studying formally?"

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“There is a reasonably priced atelier in Paris that takes women. Many of its former students are earning commissions. Once John establishes himself, I hope to follow suit.”

“As you should! This sketch is so lifelike I wouldn’t be surprised to hear it snoring too.” She nodded toward Uncle Gorham.

Our giggles woke my uncle with a snort.

Mother frowned. When they left for the dining car, she grumbled, “Quit putting on airs!”

“I wasn’t!”

“You were. How embarrassed you—we shall all be—*should you fail.*”

From then on, I only sketched while alone: during Mother’s twice-daily mineral baths.

If only they’d worked as well on her doubts about me as they did for her rheumatism.

After landing in Liverpool, Mother and I took the train to Dover, where we boarded the Empress Liner to Calais. Before heading to Gard du Nord, I waited until Mother’s train was on its way to Nice. My excuse for staying in Paris is the only one she’d accept: with two commissions and several more in the offing, John needs me at his side. Mother reluctantly agreed that I was the best fit for the task.

She’s no fool. Mother recognized my restlessness and thought it wise to say goodbye before it took its toll on us both.

The Paris train was sweltering, crowded, and interminably long because of the rainstorms roiling in from the channel. To my relief, by the time I disembarked, all that was left was a muggy mist glistening in the hot sun.

Upon reaching the studio’s doorway, I fumble through my purse for the key. As I turn it in the lock, I drop my damp umbrella: a gift from John from Boutique Bétaille.

Before I can retrieve it, the driver barges through the door, crushing the umbrella beneath his feet. He then drops the trunk with an emphatic grunt.

Though dismayed, I count out the coins for the tip I’d promised him. My attempt to hand it to him is met with a scowl until I acquiesce with an additional franc, at which point he tips his hat and lumbers down the stairs, singing.

I recognize the tune: the opening stanza of *Marche de l’oie*, from the opera bouffe, *La Belle Hélène*. Even while singing about a goose, to his credit, the driver has an excellent falsetto.

Sighing, I pick up my ruined umbrella. But as I turn to drop it into the stand beside the door, I notice it holds another.

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Has John curtailed his holiday?

I lift it from the stand. Although it is also black, John's has a distinctive paint smudge. The mark, made deliberately, allows him to identify it when he takes it to cafes on rainy days.

Like mine, this umbrella is wet.

"Who is here?" My shaking voice echoes through the studio.

No one answers.

I stare at the curtain shielding the small alcove where John's patrons change into the attire they've chosen for their portraits. Is the intruder hiding within?

Silently, I make my way to it. But when I reach the threshold, I stop. Taking a deep breath, I summon the courage to push the curtain aside.

Cold relief washes over me when I see that the narrow bed dominating the space is empty. However, the small desk, shoved against the wall on the far side of the bed, holds an open satchel. A Moynat steamer trunk, unlatched, has been placed beneath it.

I'm curious enough to open the satchel for a clue as to who has made himself at home. Just as I reach in, I hear whistling in the stairwell. Startled, I turn too quickly, knocking it over. Its contents scatter on the floor.

I stand still, dreading the click of a key turning in the lock. The intruder will find me and think I've been rummaging through his belongings. If only I'd gone to John's lodgings instead...

To my relief, the footsteps continue to the landing above and recede down the higher floor's hallway.

My heart is still pounding in my chest as I stoop to pick up everything: cigarettes and matches; a shirt rolled and tied with twine; a pair of socks and garters; a Star safety razor; and a small round brush and a ceramic bowl holding a puck of shaving soap.

There is also a leather-bound diary. To my horror, the clasp wasn't locked. It has fallen open. I recognize the writing:

This is Carroll's diary.

Our friend is diligent at the task of journaling his days. Once when John teased him about it, Carroll retorted: "Someday, you'll appreciate that I've documented your rise to fame." If it was spoken in jest, his tone had no mirth. He may be uncertain of his future, but he has no doubt about John's destiny.

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I assume John has given Carroll permission to stay here so that he may stretch his meager allowance. Just knowing that he might walk in at any moment and think I'm reading his personal thoughts leaves me quaking. But as I reach over to pick it up, one line catches my eye:

I went to St. Pierre this morning and secured rooms for John and the B's...

The diary page is dated Wednesday, July thirteenth. It places Carroll in the town of Andé. By "the B's," I assume he means Mrs. Burckhardt, Louise, and her cousins. Was it John's idea that they follow Carroll there? If so, I imagine he felt the need to leaven Mrs. Burckhardt's incessant zealotry with Carroll's calming geniality.

As is Carroll's nature, what words he avoids are even more telling than that writ large; reason enough to be alarmed at his benign description of John as "attentive" to Louise.

I can't resist the urge to turn the page to the next day...

I'm shocked when he writes that Mrs. Burckhardt cornered him after dinner to divulge that a betrothal may be forthcoming—

Between Louise and John.

The woman is delusional!

John has no such desires for Louise. Mrs. Burckhardt assumes too much from his generous gifts of time and talent. Has she never wondered why his offer was never extended to paint her too? Doubtful. She's too dense to realize he avoids the subject at all costs. That she accompanies Louise to her sittings is enough of an annoyance.

Carroll then adds:

*Mrs. B and I had a talk that I fear will influence John's future
materially...*

This is Carroll's delicate way of saying that Louise's dowry will be slim at best.

How could our friend buy into such a scheme? Surely, he knows John well enough to realize that my brother's kindness toward Louise is no more than friendship!

On Friday the fifteenth, he writes:

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Early this morning, John and Louise were under my window after breakfast... both at the mill enjoying their bath. By dint of great luck, I found them on the train to St. Georges, but then they caught the train to Rouen...

Carroll indicates that their destination is Saint Pierre-en-Port—and unchaperoned at that!

Even more shocking, Carroll notes that John’s demeanor toward Louise is “positively doting.”

Has my brother gone mad?

The last diary entry is from yesterday: Sunday, July seventeenth. In it, Carroll writes that he’s now back in Paris. He went to church with an acquaintance. Afterward, he ran into John again—on the way to the Burckhardts.

Carroll joined him. It seems that Ben, also in town, went too. After “pleasantly dining” with Louise and her family, Carroll parted ways.

In his last line, he admits:

I hesitate to mention the subject.

I imagine so!...

Should I follow suit?

Were John merely an acquaintance, I would never dare take it upon myself to broach the topic. Were he a close friend, I would do so only with the utmost care and then gauge his answer before embarrassing myself—and him—with Mrs. Burckhardt’s ludicrous claim.

But John is my brother. There is no need for either of us to withhold our concerns for each other’s wellbeing.

He has always been honest with me, and I with him. It’s the ultimate act of endearment.

With Carroll staying here, I’ll have to move my things to Madame Derode’s and wait there for John.

As I put away the fallen items, I hear rain slapping against the studio’s slanted window. The thought that I only have my mangled umbrella to shield me from the coming storm as I wave down another carriage makes me wince.

I resist the urge to take Carroll’s umbrella instead. I’m sure he’s missing it too.

CHAPTER 9

I spend at least an hour replacing Carroll's items, best as I remember, securing a carriage, coercing its driver to retrieve my two trunks, then making my way to Madame Derode's boarding house.

When we finally arrive, I enter first, leaving the driver to wrestle my luggage from the carriage's roof to the curb. The drawing room is empty, but I hear Carolus-Duran's baritone chortle fill the stairwell. It comes from John's apartment on the floor above.

"—good doctor and his wife were quite impressed by you, my dear John," he's saying. "Usually, Thérèse Pozzi looks askance at us lowly artists who have wandered from what should be our one true calling."

John is already here! ...And he's met with Dr. Pozzi and his wife? So, Duran's much-anticipated summons to the club was the reason for John's early return to Paris.

Monsieur Duran secured an audience for John after all!

"A 'calling?' And what would that be?" The question comes from Carroll.

He is here too! My cheeks burn with shame for having violated his private thoughts.

"Thérèse is a devout Catholic. To her mind, a painting with no religious theme is a sacrilege," Duran replies. "Ideally, we should all be working on depictions of the passion of Christ."

John chuckles. "Whereas, at Les Merlitons last night, her husband proudly proclaimed himself an atheist."

"Yes, by way of Protestantism," Duran continues. "Samuel Pozzi's father is a pastor in that faith—albeit in a church in Bergerac, so the lapse is understandable." I envision his lips pursed in a frown at the thought of Pozzi's provincial upbringing. "If one is to move to Paris, stating one's commitment to atheism sounds much more dashing."

"If what you say is true, it must have been a love match," Carroll insists.

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Monsieur Duran roars with laughter. “Pozzi loves the generous dowry that came with the daughter of a railroad magnate, but not so much the fact that his virgin bride spends every waking moment with her mama.”

“Surely Madame Loth-Cazalis is not all that bad,” John counters.

“Is that what you think?” Duran retorts. “Tell me, John: were you married, would you agree to have your mother-in-law move in with you?”

My brother’s answer is silence.

Considering what I’ve just read in Carroll’s diary, I can only imagine what he must be thinking.

Duran snickers. “It was quite diplomatic of you to force a semblance of appreciation for Blanchard’s insipid portrait for the lady of the house.”

“It wasn’t forced at all,” John replies. “He aptly caught Thérèse’s likeness.”

Duran snorts. “Only barely. She could have been any peasant girl holding a basket of flowers. Still, I commend you for having so cannily pointed out that a portrait of the good doctor would complement it greatly.” Duran’s gruffness undercuts his compliment.

John was so bold—*and in front of Duran?*

Did his gambit pay off?

My question is answered when John declares, “I’m truly honored that he offered me the commission.”

I stifle a joyous squeal.

“At the very least, it will allow you to verify Pozzi’s claim that his insufferable mother-in-law haunts 10 Place Vendôme like a ghost,” Duran huffs. “No wonder the poor child has put off her wifely duties.”

“Is that what Pozzi implies?” John sounds just as surprised as me.

Monsieur Duran guffaws, “Why would he lie? He is Doctor *Dieu*, after all. Having married a woman who then dismisses him must be a great blow to his ego.”

“And the perfect excuse to seek love elsewhere,” Carroll mutters.

“It is widely known that Thérèse’s widowed *maman* insisted on going with them on their honeymoon. Besides, one has only to count the months since their betrothal—in truth, years! Three, as of this month—to realize she is either barren or still a—”

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At this very moment, my carriage driver has decided to make his grand entrance. As he heaves my largest trunk over the threshold, the front door slams into the wall behind it.

The ruckus rouses Madame Derode from the kitchen. Her protestations shake the roof.

My brother and his friends are curious enough to glance down the stairwell. Finally realizing my presence, John smiles and descends to meet me. As the others follow, he directs the driver to put the trunks in his parlor, then greets me with a kiss. “You’re here finally! I thought you’d have been back long before now.”

“And I thought you’d still be in Fontainebleau.” Having read Carroll’s reflections regarding their holiday, the last thing I want to do is meet his gaze. I pull off my gloves. This gives me an excuse to look down at my hands. To my dismay, this mere act isn’t so simple with the infernal broken umbrella in my grasp. It falls to the floor.

Carroll bends down to pick it up. As he hands it back to me, his smile wavers. “I, too, was looking forward to hearing of your American adventure. Sadly, if I’m to make my next engagement, I must be off earlier than I’d hoped.” His eyes move to the window as a shrieking wind rattles its panes.

“It’s shaping up to be a gale storm,” John declares. “Emily, Carroll forgot his umbrella. He hasn’t far to go—he’s staying at the studio. If you could do him the kindness of lending him yours, I’m sure he’d appreciate it. We can retrieve it there tomorrow.”

Though wincing at the thought of my umbrella’s condition, I hand it over. “Please take it.”

Carroll indicates his thanks with a bow, then leaves.

Monsieur Duran’s words of welcome are quickly followed by an apology for his own swift departure. I have noted that since Elizabeth Gardener chided him about the lack of women in his studio, he can’t look me in the eye.

He has nothing to worry about. Even if he were to change this abhorrent policy, I have no desire to storm the gates of Atelier Carolus-Duran. Besides the fact that I find no greater hell than the pity of others, I join the rest of Paris in its growing belief that, at least in John’s case, the student’s gifts exceed that of his mentor.

The Pozzi commission proves it.

Despite the role Duran played in John securing it, I can only imagine his chagrin when John’s observation was seen as the invitation to paint Pozzi and that it was so promptly accepted by the good doctor.

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Carroll and Duran’s attempt to shut the door is stymied by the strong wind. John and I watch as Carroll opens my umbrella. Noting its odd tilt, Carroll frowns, whereas Duran roars with laughter.

Just then, my carriage driver stomps down the boarding house’s stairs and strides toward the carriage. Duran buttonholes him. From the way he gesticulates at Carroll and then at himself, I assume he’s indicating the route that will take the carriage back to 73B Rue Notre Dame des Champs before taking Duran to his atelier.

My guess is validated by the odd look on the driver’s face.

Carroll frowns at the man’s puzzled response. As our friend turns back to stare at me, the wind gives up its grip on Madame Derode’s front door, slamming it shut.

Yet again, our landlady shrieks, “*Au, mon Dieu!*”

Unfazed, John shrugs. “Let’s talk upstairs.” He motions for me to lead the way.

With each step, I try to block out the thought that Carroll may find some clue of my intrusion. At the same time, I wish he had warned John about Mrs. Burckhardt’s ridiculous claim so that the burden hadn’t fallen to me.

The afternoon tea John cajoled from Madame Derode is almost as bountiful as those we partook of in London. The feast is appreciated. After my journey, I’m ravenous.

Despite having just come from the luncheon at the Pozzi’s abode, John fills a plate for himself with fruit, cold mutton, and thick slices of bread laid out on a tarnished silver tray. I’ve long realized that victory only increases my brother’s already robust appetite.

A sherry bottle is open. John pours a small glass for me, then walks to the mantel and picks up one of the three glasses used for the celebratory toasts accompanying the retelling of John’s conquest for Pozzi’s commission.

My brother listens attentively as I recount the weeks we were separated. After my tale of our trip to Hampton Court Palace, I add: “By the way, Vernon will be here in the fall before we leave for Venice.”

“With Mary, I suppose,” John says.

I stay silent. The last thing I want is to allow John to revisit his fascination with Vernon’s proclivities. Why can’t he just accept our friend the way she is?

Taking a breath, I declare, “I also visited the Royal Female School of Art.”

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John frowns. “On Gower Street?”

“Yes.” My attempt to smile fails miserably: an apt reaction to what I saw there. Sadly, Evelyn’s assessment was correct. The tiny drawing desks are crammed together, leaving the students shoulder to shoulder. So little light permeates its grimy windows that it’s a wonder one can see the result of their artistic efforts.

And yet, the camaraderie one feels among others just as desperate to commit themselves to their art—despite such intolerable conditions—provides the necessary illumination.

“Emily, if you choose to study in England—”

“Not at all.” Hesitantly, I add: “Instead, I wish to apply here in Paris, perhaps at Académie Colarossi.”

“A much better scenario.” With a relieved smile, he adds, “And I will do all I can to help you prepare for it.”

“Thank you, Johnny.” Elation races through me. Nothing matters to me as much as my brother’s approval.

Does he feel the same way? It’s time to test my assumption that the answer is yes.

I look out the window before asking: “How was your holiday in Fontainebleau?”

John snickers. “As pleasurable as can be expected.”

“When it comes to Mrs. Burckhardt, my expectations are quite low,” I admit.

“Then you wouldn’t have been disappointed.” John gulps down the dregs in his glass, then pours himself another sherry.

When he says no more, I can’t help but blurt out: “And Louise?”

“Louise is...” John shrugs. “Well, she is Louise.”

Our eyes meet in the mirror over the mantel. “That is to say what, exactly?”

He sighs. “Everything you know her to be: sweet, silly, naïve...hopeful...” He reaches over and picks up a piece of the sliced baguette from the tea tray, absently kneading its soft center between his thumb and index finger. “And hopeless.”

“John, are you...fond of her?” I brace myself for what I fear most: a declaration of love.

John’s hand stops its busy work. He stares into the fire. “Yes, fondness is a good word for it. No need to pretend otherwise.” He throws the tuft of bread into the flames. “Not now, anyway.”

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I shake with relief. Maybe Louise made him aware of her meager dowry. Or perhaps their proximity made her insipidness too much for him to bear. More than likely, the thought of being tethered to Mrs. Burckhardt for a lifetime opened John's eyes.

No matter the reason, my brother realizes the futility of such a union. I thank God for that.

Carroll was right not to broach the topic of John's love for her. Not now, anyway.

Does this mean that the matter is not truly at an end?

I'm almost afraid to ask, but I must: "Why not now as opposed to...ever?"

John pours more sherry into his glass, then does the same to mine. "The reason Duran was here is that we were celebrating. He, too, spent the weekend in the country—at his cottage in Montgeron, near Fontainebleau. By a fortuitous twist of fate, as Louise and I were returning from an excursion, he was also at the train station, returning to Paris. Knowing that Samuel Pozzi was to sup at the Merlitons last night, he suggested I come back with him so that he might finally make good on his promise to introduce us."

As innocently as I can muster, I say: "It was a success, I take it."

"I would call it that, yes." He nods, but modesty forces his gaze elsewhere. "He then invited us to lunch today, with him and his wife, at their home in 10 Place Vendôme." He holds out his glass. "Emily, I've been offered the commission to paint Samuel."

"Johnny—that's marvelous!" I tip my glass to his. "How did it happen?"

"When we were shown Thérèse's portrait, I suggested that her husband merited his own."

Laughingly, I declare, "How brazen of you."

"I thought so too." He chuckles. "You should have seen the look on Duran's face. All the color went out of it. I thought he'd pass out!"

"I suppose he imagined it was his for the asking," I point out.

"Well, he thought wrong." John's tone is no longer jocular. "I think it finally dawned on him that we are equals now." He dismisses any thought to the contrary with a wave of his hand. "The Pozzis will be at the studio tomorrow. I'd like you to be there too, to serve the tea."

"Of course, John." Hesitantly, I ask, "And what of Carroll?"

"Duran is allowing him to stay at his atelier until he leaves for America at week's end. They are moving his things there now."

I place a cool palm on my face to stop my cheeks from warming at the memory of my indiscretion. Not that John notices. My brother gazes into the roaring fire. I assume he's thinking

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of Samuel Pozzi. He sorely needs the doctor's generous commission. That it belongs to Paris society's favorite *bon vivant* makes it all the better.

More importantly to John, Pozzi is the one man who has Amélie Gautreau's ear, not to mention her heart.

CHAPTER 10

“Quit fussing about,” John chides me from the window. “The Pozzis are here.”

I’m fussing about, as he so indelicately put it, because of the state of his studio.

Carroll left it as he’d found it: in disarray. John insists structure stifles his ingenuity. Frankly, I feel it has more to do with laziness than creativity.

Everyone finds it appalling. Mother, who rarely invokes Scripture, need only take one step into John’s studio before she is muttering, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness...” amid heavy sighs.

Had she seen it a mere hour ago, it may have provoked the blasphemies we’d heard from her lips only once, thankfully, when we were children, and a porter had put our baggage on the wrong train.

I bite my tongue so as not to do that now.

For hours I’ve shoved all the flotsam and jetsam—John’s ukulele and banjo, a chess board, and various hats, capes, shawls, and other odd paraphernalia which might be construed as child’s play—into the studio’s curtained alcove. Props and costumes are the *mise-en-scène* donned by friends for John’s character poses.

He insisted I leave his butterfly collection on display. “Pozzi will appreciate it. He collects beautiful things.”

“I’m sure he’ll be impressed that you euthanize them with your cigar smoke,” I mutter.

While I swept and dusted, I sent John to a patisserie. He has returned with a box filled with pain au chocolat, kouign amann, chasson aux pommes, and chouquettes to be served with a Turkish coffee he insists our guests will appreciate, having experienced the beverage while dining with them.

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I get to John's side in time to see Pozzi help his wife onto their carriage's lowest step. She taps her foot impatiently as their burly driver takes orders from his master: to carry Thérèse to the doorstep so as not to muddy her silk slippers.

In the man's arms, she looks like a doll.

John glances around the room. "Ah well. What is done is done."

I, too, scan it, floor to ceiling—where a tarantula has woven its tubed web right above the window.

Handing the broom to John, I point to the atrocity. Even leaping, John's efforts to reach it are futile. It merely sways in the breeze of his swats. With a sigh, he gives it back. "Thérèse is much too short to notice."

"Even the petite glance up now and again," I insist.

"We'll know she does when she shrieks," he retorts.

"And if she faints, we'll know you've lost the commission," I counter.

Footsteps stop at the door. I leap at Pozzi's bold knock.

Putting a finger to his lips, John hisses: "Just don't look up."

After opening the door for our guests, John gives Thérèse a deferential nod. In contrast, he offers the doctor his hand, then shakes it fervently, as if greeting an old friend.

While niceties are exchanged, John's eyes never leave Pozzi. He scans the cut of the doctor's grey wool suit, which fits like a second skin. The shirt beneath his gray and black plaid cravat is stark white. Pozzi's hair, parted to the left of his widow's peak, is swept back. His beard is closely trimmed. The pomade which holds it in place glistens there and on the tips of the mustache.

At some point, John nods in my direction: "My dear sister, Emily, is here to assist me."

John's term of endearment catches Pozzi's attention. His deep-set dark eyes gaze into mine.

Few men see beyond my hump, let alone look me in the eye. Over time, those who warm to John realize my constant role in his life and open their minds to the possibility that I, too, share his better qualities. When Pozzi holds out his hand, I assume this is the case.

I take it, but I'm not prepared for the firmness of his grip. When finally it relents, his strong fingers linger to caress mine.

Yes, this intimacy affects me greatly.

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Does every woman feel this way? Or are my feelings more keenly felt because such a show of attention is so rare?

The former, I hope. Otherwise, he is cruel, and I am a fool.

I back away toward the small table set for our meager repast. Even Pozzi's chuckle at my alarm is mesmerizing.

Is his desire to enthrall in direct correlation to the need to be loved in return? It may be the one affliction he cannot cure.

Thérèse refuses to join her husband as he admires John's current works-in-progress: Louise's portrait and that of Mrs. Catherine Townsend, a friend of our family since John's birth in Florence.

Nor does she deign to sit on the chaise. Instead, to my dismay, she has positioned herself beside the window as if, though closed, it will somehow dilute the smell of linseed oil and turpentine: noxious but necessary fixtures in a studio.

Lifting her gloved hand from its ledge, she frowns. Its white leather is now smudged with soot.

I ignore her pout. If John is correct, the only opinion that matters is her husband's.

Despite the questions Samuel asks John—why he chose the feathered fan in Mrs. Townsend's hand; what has caused Louise's pout—the doctor's eyes never leave my face.

John doesn't notice. His eyes stay on his paintings, delighted to share his process with one he knows appreciates it.

Sadly, John forgot to purchase cream to cut the Turkish coffee's bitterness. At least, that is the excuse I give myself for Thérèse Pozzi's refusal to drink it.

"Another croissant, Madame Pozzi?" The question is superfluous. In the past quarter-hour, she has only nibbled at the one on the plate she now holds.

Without answering, she hands me the plate as she moves to the chaise but does not sit down. "Samuel." Her declaration, soft but firm, interrupts John's explanation of the colors used to create the iridescent water in a Venetian canal painting. "Sitting for a portrait is an arduous process. Perhaps we should ask John to paint you at our home. Wouldn't that be more comfortable?" She slaps the chaise's seat with the soiled glove. A tempest of dust now caught in a ray of light makes her point.

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Samuel laughs at my brother's dismay. "If that is your wish, my dear." Pulling his watch from his waistcoat, he glances down at it. "John, shall we start tomorrow, say, nine o'clock? My hospital hours are in the afternoons."

"Yes, that's fine." I catch the disappointment in John's voice. Confined to the Pozzis' apartment, the painting will be subjected to Thérèse's constant scrutiny. I doubt her vision of her husband matches John's.

My brother and I walk his guests to the door. Whereas John shakes Pozzi's hand goodbye, I follow Thérèse's lead and curtsy.

The door closes—and just in the nick of time. The tarantula falls from its web. It now clings to the window's ledge.

"Well, at least one of us expected as much." John touches the sill with a finger. When he lifts it, I can see it is black even from where I'm standing.

Still, he opens the window and nudges the tarantula beyond the sill before closing it and wiping his hand on his kerchief.

"Remember, John: Amalia made the same request. You didn't mind at all." My goal is to sound hopeful, though I feel anything but that.

"Ramón and Amalia's home is warm and inviting as well," John counters, "whereas the Pozzis reside in an aesthetic tomb. You should see it! Every surface is either embroidered, draped, or gilded. Every item within—especially *objets d'art*—has been chosen to awe all those who enter. The man is as vainglorious as he is Godly clean."

"If that's the case, your portrait will be its crowning glory." Hesitantly, I add, "When you paint him, wear your cleanest suit. Better still, consider wearing a smock."

"Never! ..." He freezes, then taps his forehead. "That's an interesting idea!"

"You're serious? You'd consider it?" I'm teasing. John prides himself on the fact that he can paint in gentlemen's duds without calamity.

"No, silly!" John strides toward the door. "After delivering Thérèse to their apartment, he's headed to the Faculty of Medicine to perform in the operating theater. Perhaps I'll find my inspiration there."

Elated, he whistles as he strides down the stairwell.

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I don't anticipate John's return until late afternoon. I'll spend that time painting.

In our haste to ready the studio for the Pozzis, I'd not thought to bring my paintbox. I need not worry. John willingly shares his paints with me.

Until now, I've only worked with watercolors and charcoal pencils, something I must rectify as soon as possible. I console myself with the knowledge that John's use of oils before attending Duran's studio was also negligible.

As for what to paint, I'll copy the work of a master: in this case, John.

I scan the room. There is a small table beside the easel of Louise's portrait. On it, a heavy jar holds tall, thick brushes. John prefers them for even the most minor stroke. Beside the jar is a square palette. Generous dabs of various pigments circle the palette's thumb hole like planets orbiting the sun. The closest of these is a stark white, followed by red, two shades of brown, a moss-toned green, a drab blue, and of course, bone black. The arrangement is deliberate. It allows John to mix adjacent tints for the right shades that create the middle tones.

The rest of the palette is a cyclone of color. Each swirl documents his attempt at recreating the nuances that bring his subject to life. Otherwise, the painting is merely a memorial on canvas.

No one wants to be buried alive.

I gaze up at Louise's portrait, comparing my memory of her features with John's vision of her. Admittedly, the shape of her face is exact. John has had plenty of time to study it. A porcelain complexion is warmed by Louise's inevitable blush when provoked by others' reactions to her silliness. It doesn't help that her chin, though oval, elongates her face, thus adding to the illusion of helplessness. Having no arch, her brows, thick and dark, show no guile.

Again, true to the subject.

The one saving grace of her unruly fringe is its golden glints.

One hand is twisted oddly on her hip. The other pinches a single plucked rose between its thumb and forefinger: John knows what catches the eye. She purses her lips as if bored. Maybe she's in pain. Having posed for him for hours, I wouldn't doubt it.

Her limpid eyes stare back. They have no more life than the cut bloom in her hand.

John has rightly wrought Louise's anxious sadness.

If it's true that love is blind, this portrait proves he's not in her thrall.

Ah...

The rose's petals are past their peak.

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So, that is what John really thinks of her.

For once, I feel sorry for Louise. Her mother's expectations have ruined her gentle friendship with John.

Excited that I comprehend his vision, I fairly float to the high chest holding his paints, taking tubes that will allow me to create my own portrait of her.

In fact, I'll forego an initial sketch and paint directly onto the canvas with a thick brush.

Since I lack John's artistic agility, I don the smock he had to wear while at Ecole des Beaux-Arts but that he now smugly ignores. I'm slimmer and shorter, but because of my distorted back, it doesn't hang on me.

I have no expectation that my painting will rival John's. He's a master at realism.

My goal is to make Louise seem happy.

Having never seen her as anything but perplexed, it may be too great a task.

“Impressive. More so, considering how much you dislike her.” Carroll's voice is so startling that my brush swipes errantly to the right, obliterating my attempt at taming Louise's fringe. Now it resembles a thatch of hair when caught in a monsoon.

“Why are you here?” To my dismay, the question sounds gruff.

“To return your umbrella.” Carroll points to it in the stand. “And to retrieve mine.” He holds it up.

“Do you...do you really think I've captured her likeness?” I stutter.

His lips purse contemplatively.

“Be honest,” I beseech him.

Carroll raises a brow. “May I assume you'll do likewise?”

He's referring to his satchel.

Slowly, I place the brush and palette on the table. “Regarding what?”

“Yesterday, were you brought to John's boarding house from here?”

“Yes.” I shrug. “I apologize for disturbing your things, Carroll. I had no idea you'd be staying here. I was under the assumption that John was still in Fontainebleau and curious to know who had John's permission to be here. Your satchel dropped by accident. Everything fell out—”

“Including my diary?” He dares me to deny it.

Contritely, I nod. “It fell open! In my defense, it was unclasped—”

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“So, you read it.”

“Yes,” I murmur.

Relief floods his face. “Thank God! Emily...*I don't know what to say to him!*”

“Say nothing. John has already made his decision.”

“He’s willing to accept Louise—without a dowry?” He frowns. “I see where it might be a convenient solution for both, but still—”

I snicker. “When, like John, you’re a handsome man with a promising future, marrying the simpleton for her modest inheritance is the very last thing he should do!”

“Oh! ... I thought you’d agree....” He turns away.

Thoughtless me! Were Mrs. Burckhardt shoving Louise at poor Carroll, he couldn’t afford the luxury of running away.

Tenderly, I say, “You’re a good friend, Carroll. Knowing you’d find the topic difficult to broach with John, I took it upon myself to relieve you of the burden.” Seeing his startled stare, I add, “I assure you, I did so in the most delicate way possible.”

Though Carroll nods, he’s not entirely convinced. I’ve never hidden my opinions from him about the Burckhardts, neither mother nor daughter.

“John assured me that although he is fond of Louise, his feelings for her go no deeper,” I insist. “In fact, to use his own words, John finds her hopeless.”

“An understatement,” Carroll admits. “But thank God.”

“For once, we must thank the merely mortal Mrs. Burckhardt for playing her hand so openly. Her indiscretion put you in a precarious position, whether her intent was an honest kindness or a cruel warning for you to pass to him.”

Carroll scoffs, “Hardly the former. Nor, for that matter, the latter. That conniving old cow just doesn’t know how to keep her mouth shut.”

Dumbstruck by his candor, I giggle uncontrollably.

Relieved at my response—and John’s too, I suppose—Carroll joins in.

We’re laughing so hard that, to steady us both, he puts his hand on my back. Then, realizing he’s touching the hardened lump under my smock, he rears back. “Emily, I’m so sor—”

I clasp my hand to his mouth. “Please, Carroll—*Don't!* I just... Like you, I appreciate that our friendship is based on our mutual concern for John. *Nothing more.*”

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Our gaze is broken by the sound of quick footsteps and whistling. I recognize the Folies Bergère ditty: John is back.

His way of sharing his joy takes the form of a jig. I'm drawn in first and then Carroll until we're laughing so hard that finally, we pull away to catch our breath.

I gasp, "I take it you found your inspiration in Pozzi's surgery session?"

John's eyes sparkle. "The term 'operating theatre' is apropos. There, he's an artist. Blood was everywhere—except on Pozzi! Not a drop! He's living proof that successful surgeons aren't butchers."

Carroll guffaws. "It's good to know that there is more to the man than just looking dapper in a well-cut frock coat. You're sure to find just the right one in his vast wardrobe."

John shrugs. "The hospital's halls are lined with portraits of doctors in those damn black suits against a drab brown backdrop—too mundane for a man like Pozzi. He's much more than a doctor. In society's eyes, the scalpel is his calling card, but his allure is his—his *je ne sais quoi*."

"Judith Gautier made that perfectly clear," I reply.

"She's right." John pats his stomach. "I must confess: the surgery almost ruined my appetite. A shame that would have been, considering the feast Thérèse had waiting upon Samuel's return." He smiles beatifically. "Of course, I was asked to join them."

Carroll's smile fades. I assume he'd hoped to eat dinner with John.

"Afterward, I suggested we go through his wardrobe to choose what would work best for the painting," John continues. "He owns countless suits; each has three waistcoats with matching cravats. Not to mention dittos, top hats—"

"Then he's a dandy?" I ask.

"By perpetrating that impression, he receives the notoriety he craves," John insists, "As a surgeon, as a boulevardier—"

"And as the 'love doctor,' with the endorsement of the Queen of the Pose," Carroll declares. "I take it you found a suit you felt is right for the portrait?"

John chortles, "*Suit?* Hardly."

Exasperated, I ask, "Then, what will he wear?"

John strides to the high chest. After rummaging through a lower drawer, he grasps a paint tube and a drawing pad. "Pozzi will be wearing his *dressing gown*—which is this color."

Unscrewing the cap, he nicks a dollop onto the white sheet. The color: bright scarlet.

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“It’s the perfect expression of everything he is as a man. Passionate ...*mesmerizing* ... He is....” John searches for the right words: “He is... *a very brilliant creature.*”

He truly believes that.

Good. Inspired, John will impress Samuel—and at the same time Amélie too, who will then be eager for John to paint her.

Will her husband agree?

Carroll stares at the scarlet paint. “Blood is a much deeper hue,” he points out.

“Trust me, this will be even more shocking,” John proclaims.

“Is that a good thing for a portrait?” I wonder aloud.

“Pozzi will think so.” John is resolute on that.

I pray he’s right.

CHAPTER 11

OCTOBER

“Are you free tomorrow afternoon?” John’s question comes after we’ve put Vernon and Mary in the fiacre that will take them back to their hotel.

Though in town all week. Today, John guided them through the Louvre. Otherwise, Pozzi’s sittings kept John from joining us for lunches or teas, let alone attending the recitals and plays we enjoyed.

“It is Vernon and Mary’s last day in Paris,” I remind him. “If you need me, I’ll make an excuse to forego our engagement.”

“I do. Samuel’s surgery schedule was altered on Tuesdays. Unfortunately, on that afternoon, Thérèse has her *jours*. He felt it best that his last sitting take place here.”

I nod. “Then it’s settled.”

"Emily..." John hesitates. "Should the subject arise, please reassure Madame Pozzi that you're a constant presence, especially when other guests stop by."

Other guests...

Perhaps Madame Gautreau?

If there is any truth to what Duran divulged to John and Carroll about the Pozzi’s loveless marriage, should Amélie make an appearance, my presence will do much to stop tongues from wagging.

“If you wish, John.” Sadly, Pierre Gautreau’s chagrin is about to be realized.

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Samuel Pozzi comes bearing gifts: for John, a small ribbon-wrapped box of ganache from Debaube & Gallais. For me, a large bouquet of yellow roses. He nods at Louise’s unfinished portrait. “If she deserves one, you must have at least nineteen more.”

“Thank you.” I reward his thoughtfulness with an uncertain smile. As I go off in search of a vase, Mrs. Burckhardt’s silly concern over yellow as being bad luck comes to mind.

By the time I find one large enough and have filled it from the water closet, Samuel has emerged from the alcove. He wears the red dressing gown that entralls John. I see why. Its hue is as bright as fresh blood. The oversized collar spans the doctor’s broad shoulders. The loose sleeves sport cuffs so wide that they almost reach his elbows. Its sash, made of the same velvet, is thin but long enough to be looped several times when tied at his waist. Beneath the robe, Samuel wears a white shirt with frills along the buttons, collar, and cuffs. His feet are clad in colorfully embroidered white Moroccan slippers.

John, who has been preparing his pallet, now looks at his subject. Smiling broadly, he beckons Samuel to a specific spot on the studio floor.

Immediately, Samuel recreates the stance used in the painting. Only his right foot peeks out beyond the folds of the robe. His right hand’s thumb and index finger clasp the garment just below his sternum. Two fingers on his left hand hook the sash, bending it low across his hip.

His face is turned slightly to the left. His eyes seem intent on what has captured his attention.

John murmurs, “You see what I mean?”

“Yes.” Awed, my voice is so soft that I’m not sure John heard me.

He may believe Samuel is gazing at nothing. He’s wrong.

Samuel is looking at me.

From their banter, it seems it only took a fortnight of sittings for John and Samuel to become fast friends.

Except when speaking of Duran (whose tendency toward self-congratulation amuses both), Samuel’s only deprecating words are for himself. However, he relays his medical accomplishments to his small but enthralled audience through anecdotes of his daily routine.

We’re duly impressed.

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My brother and his celebrated subject enjoy trading recommendations for the city's many arts events. Samuel now asks: "Have you attended Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, at the Opéra-Comique? Tragedy at its finest!"

"Nice to know. It's been a while since I've had a good cry," John replies. In return, he suggests: "Put Charles Lamoureux's Société des Nouveaux-Concerts on your itinerary. They are complex gems. The man is a true apostle of Wagner." To prove his point, John lays down his palette and goes to the upright piano. The tentative notes of the *Tristan und Isolde* overture cascade into a frenzy of notes connoting lovers torn asunder.

Despite John's spirited playing, Samuel speaks loudly enough for me to hear him. "Your wretched back—is it a defect from birth?"

Startled, I reply, "No. An accident. I was not yet four."

"Do you remember it?"

Dumbfounded by his open curiosity, I shake my head.

He leans closer. "Surely, you want to know."

I gape at his supposition. Yes, I've wondered. But my mind refuses to remember its cause despite its aftermath: deformity and a lifetime of dull pain.

Reading the longing in my face, he asks, "What do your parents say?"

"They...never speak of it." Sweat dampens the back of my neck.

Samuel nods. My answer doesn't surprise him. "John is older. He'd remember."

Caught up in his playing, John can't save me from Pozzi's inquisition. "I think not. Otherwise, he would have told me."

"If you've never asked, he may not be aware of your interest."

I stare back. Why should he be concerned?

"I only ask because an operation may remedy the issue," he assures me. "From your stance and gait, I deduce it wasn't set properly. Depending on which vertebrae were broken, there is a chance surgery could straighten your spine."

I chide myself for doubting his concern. Few of John's acquaintances are comfortable enough to broach the subject of my affliction.

I'm about to thank him when he adds: "If you've made peace with it, no problem. Frankly, it suits you; it lends credence to your quiet coyness." His leer sweeps over me. "Truth be told, there are men who find an affliction such as yours most attractive. Some to the point of fetishism."

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He drones on as if explaining a laboratory experiment to an ignorant student.

To him, I'm no different than a curiosity in P.T. Barnum's freak show.

A rap on the door saves me from more of his callousness.

Not surprisingly, John is oblivious to both annoyances.

Amélie stands before me, looking just as elegant as I last saw her.

Her fitted jacket and slim skirt, white with pale blue stripes, hug her tightly. The collar rises high behind her neck, but the lapels are thin and cut so that the jacket must be buttoned just below her breast but above a sheer white lace chemise. Her parasol is made of the suit's material. Her gloves are the same blue color as the stripes.

I'm surprised she has an escort: a slight, fussy man around my age. He's dressed in a white suit made of satin and accessorized with patent leather gloves and boots, also white. His dark hair is marcelled. His mustache, though thin, is long and stiffened so that it curls up at both ends. He carries a walking stick with a unique ornament on its head: a bejeweled turtle.

They are not yet aware I've opened the door. Though their heads are bowed, their mutterings are loud enough for me to hear the man say: "My dear, you presume too much of our mutual friend."

"He is enthralled. And I plan that he stays that way."

"I assume you have some specific enchantment in mind..." His voice trails off when he realizes my presence.

Amélie's glance is dismissive. Without a word, she hands me her parasol and sweeps into the room.

Pulling off her gloves, she greets John with a nod. His eyes light up like a child's while witnessing his first fireworks. As for Pozzi, she holds out her hand so that he may kiss it. As his lips linger, she smirks as she gazes back at her escort.

I reach to take his items: the cane in one hand, a slim book in another. Dismissively, he taps my hand away. He goes to Pozzi first, bowing slightly. He then turns to John. "Finally, we meet!" With a coy grin, he walks to him. "Robert, Comte de Montesquiou-Fézensac."

John nods uncertainly. "I've heard much about you, Count."

"And I, of you." Count Montesquiou proffers the book. "A gift. My poetry." He leans in and murmurs something so softly that I cannot imagine John heard it.

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From his expression, he had indeed, and it was not to his liking. John’s smile vanishes. His eyes go to Samuel—

But only for a moment before moving to me. “My sister, Emily.”

I bow my head to the Count but nod curtly at Amélie. My change in status is acknowledged with curious stares and swift nods.

Amélie’s vacant stare still doesn’t acknowledge our previous encounters.

While I prop her parasol beneath the window, John goes to the bureau and drops Montesquiou’s book into the bottom drawer.

Before the others notice his slight, I walk to the tea service. Voice shaking, I ask, “Madame, may I offer you tea? With sugar? Or perhaps, cream?”

Amélie shrugs. “The latter.”

“Count?”

“Neither,” he sniffs.

“Doctor?”

“Both.”

None of their answers surprise me.

John’s guests are silent as I go through the motions of my task. I’m all too familiar with curiosity’s gaze. Those with better manners are quick to glance elsewhere and make polite conversation. When receiving her teacup, Madame Gautreau sees no need for such subterfuge. She studies me as if I’m an exotic bird. “Your back. Is it...painful?” There is no sympathy in the question, merely curiosity.

“Only when others show pity.”

Pozzi chuckles. He knows I’ve answered the one question I dread.

Takin his cup, Montesquiou prods: “An accident?”

Pozzi takes it upon himself to respond on my behalf: “So she’s been told.”

“You don’t remember?” Madame Gautreau’s stare implies disbelief.

“Emily was only three,” John explains. He’s aware of my exasperation but manages to keep a pleasant lilt in his voice.

As I walk over to Pozzi with his tea, he declares, “I could hypnotize you—pull the memory from the deepest recesses of your mind. Now, if you wish.” Though he smiles encouragingly, his eyes sweep the room. The gesture isn’t for me but for his adoring audience.

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Amélie claps her hands. “Like a parlor trick!”

“Thank you, no.” For John’s sake, I resist the urge to fling the hot liquid at Pozzi’s smirk.

Reading my face, the doctor realizes it’s time to drop the subject.

He and his guests may now focus on much more important topics: each other.

For the past hour, I’ve done my best to ignore their conversation, which revolves around known scandals, perceived affairs, unsubstantiated gossip, and cruel innuendo.

Had I assumed there was genuine affection between Madame Gautreau and Montesquiou, what I hear now quashes that notion. They are in a competition. Samuel’s chuckles and rejoinders are weighed on a scale, measuring his affection toward one or the other.

John never comments. Instead, he smirks at the tidbits being bandied about.

At first, I was appalled. But after two hours of constant exposure to such odious behavior, I’m numbed to its sting.

Frankly, from the beginning, the scales have been tipped in Montesquiou’s favor. No matter what grist Amélie mills, it proves mealy compared to the Count’s tasty gossip.

Her latest parry: “The sixth Marquis de Belbeuf is to marry the Duke of Mornay’s daughter. Not the pretty one, Marie Eugenie, but the baby, Mathilde. I assume she comes with an enormous dowry because she is pitifully plain. Still, the gown will be stunning. I hear it is mauve, with lots of tulle. Hopefully not too much, as she is already a very big girl—”

Montesquiou’s chortling stops her.

Madame Gautreau eyes him coldly. “I fail to see the humor.”

“Not surprising, madame. Your obliviousness is part of your charm.” By her gloating, his last word is all she has heard.

Having mollified her, he adds, “An *un mariage de raison*. In this case, the practicality is appreciated by both parties.” He leans in conspiratorially. “She may wear a dress to the altar, but it’s doubtful she’ll ever be seen in another. Her propensity for men’s suits is no secret.” He thinks for a moment. “She and the Marquis are about the same size. Soon she will be raiding his wardrobe.”

Now Pozzi is laughing too.

Amélie’s lower lip trembles. Once again, she’s been bested by her rival.

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“Speaking of upcoming nuptials, my niece, Elisabeth, is to marry Count Greffulhe on Tuesday fortnight,” Montesquiou proclaims.

“An odd day,” Amélie mutters.

“Indeed,” Montesquiou concedes. “Except that it is the one day in which his mistress will yield for it.”

Pozzi snorts. “Who is she to choose?”

“The stupidest of all seven he visits, apparently. She traded it for a pricey bribe—albeit a lesser one than those proposed by the other six.” Montesquiou shrugs. “Not that she’ll ever know. They are forbidden to speak to each other.”

Amélie’s eyes open wide. “He has a mistress for each day of the week?”

“He’s a prolific lover,” Montesquiou explains. “Exhaustingly so. The arrangement suits everyone involved.”

“I wonder if Elisabeth will feel the same way,” Amélie coos.

“No one marries for love,” Montesquiou counters. “You certainly didn’t.”

Amélie admits this with a shrug, then stares lovingly at Samuel.

“Say, John, have you heard of Jules Barbey d’Aureville?” Samuel asks.

“The poet?” John responds.

Samuel chuckles. “Were you to judge him from his poems, you would forgo his novels. But I can attest they are a much better read.”

“In any form, the man is abominable,” Montesquiou declares.

Samuel ignores him. “Because he had questions regarding my medical specialty, he shared with me his upcoming novel: *Une Histoire sans Nom*.”

John nods, intrigued. “Does this indicate the story is to be untitled?”

“In truth, it indicates that the topic is a morality play on the aftermath of a naive girl’s somnambulistic rape,” Samuel explains.

“There are times I’ve slept through my wifely duties,” Amélie admits.

Montesquiou titters at what he assumes is a witticism, but then he realizes her nescience and laughs even louder.

Amélie is oblivious to the slight.

How dare they mock Pierre! I squelch the urge to retort.

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Samuel continues: “In the story, as the girl grows great with child, her righteous mother, a baroness, berates her in the hope that she will lose the fetus. When her wish comes true, the baroness buries it. The girl does not learn of the deed until after the baroness dies when she and their servant find her mother’s bloody blouse.”

Amélie wrinkles her nose. “What is the purpose of this odious tale?”

Montesquiou scoffs, “Perhaps to warn us against wasting even a sou on that madman’s scribblings!”

“On the contrary,” Samuel replies. “I thought it an excellent parable on shame. If not for the chiding of others, one may not even know one is expected to experience it.”

“Why should the girl bear any shame if she had no knowledge of the crime against her?” I ask.

John’s guests stare as if seeing me for the first time.

“Or to quote Thomas Gray, ‘Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise,’” John adds.

“Of course, the girl was complicit in the deed!” Amélie declares.

I shake my head. “It is the writer’s intention that she is ignorant of the rape—”

“A stupid presumption!” Amélie huffs. “The reader will not believe she is so innocent.”

Samuel laughs heartily. “Madame Gautreau, for one who has yet to read the book, how can you assume what the character believes?”

Her eyes narrow at his jibe. “Well, Monsieur Barbey is wrong about one thing. A true baroness would have had the *servant* bury the fetus.”

“Barbey is frequently wrong,” Montesquiou proclaims. “But so are you, with that ridiculous presumption. If she were truly a baroness, the rapist’s body would have been buried alongside it.” He pauses in thought. “Unless the culprit was an aristocrat of equal or higher rank.”

John looks away so that Montesquiou can’t see that he’s chuckling.

Amélie’s brow arches. “Mr. Sargent, do we amuse you?”

With a slight bow, John replies, “Madame, you enchant me.”

Amélie preens at his compliment.

Coyly, Montesquiou purses his lips. “And I do not?”

John ignores him. Instead, he picks up his brush and retraces his last stroke.

Amélie snickers at the slight. When Montesquiou glares, she feigns innocence with a shrug.

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“John, Duran agrees that he should join me in sponsoring your membership to Les Merlitons,” Samuel says.

Montesquiou scowls at this news.

“I think it is a marvelous idea,” Amélie purrs, then winks at Samuel. Like me, she enjoys Montesquiou’s frustration.

Samuel winks back. Apparently, he relishes pitting them against each other.

A quote from Virgil comes to mind: *A snake lurks in the grass.*

Three, in fact. But Samuel is the cobra among them.

“Oh, dear. I’m late to a very important *jour*.” As Amélie stands up, she smiles coyly at Pozzi. “Samuel, will you do me the kindness of walking me out?”

Breaking his pose, Pozzi heads toward the alcove to exchange the dressing gown for his jacket.

As he and Amélie walk out, John scans the room, gauging the light. “Emily, can you roll up the shade about a metre?”

Montesquiou rises from the sofa and moves behind John; I assume it’s to scrutinize his technique.

As I raise the shade, I notice Amélie’s parasol. Oh, bother! If her carriage has already driven away, I will have to return it by courier...

I glance out. The street is crowded, but then I see them; Amélie’s arm is tucked into Pozzi’s. I watch, mesmerized, as he caresses her cheek. Her eyes are glazed with tears.

How can there be such passion in the act of a finger stroke? *How I long to find out...*

Montesquiou prattles on: “She is mad about him, you know. But of course, you do.” He sighs profoundly. “There is an essence that transcends beauty in that one like none I’ve ever seen or felt before. Truly, a seductive quality. And no one is immune.”

I watch as Samuel hails a fiacre.

As the carriage pulls up to them, Montesquiou’s voice has dropped to a wistful murmur: “That coy smile is the deepest cut of all. Is affection being bestowed, or are we being mocked? My guess: the latter. And yet we don’t mind at all. Just being acknowledged is worth it.”

I now understand the impetus of Montesquiou’s caustic barbs at Madame Gautreau: He is her scorned lover, and Samuel is his rival—

And yet, he grovels in Samuel’s presence.

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Amélie’s reluctance to leave Pozzi is evident as she climbs into the fiacre. She shakes her head adamantly, upset at something he is saying to her.

“You think that highly of her?” John asks Montesquiou. “And yet, you describe her as so cunningly cruel.”

“Her... *Madame Gautreau*?” Montesquiou giggles raucously. “I am speaking of *Samuel*.”

As astonished as I am by the Count’s answer, I’m mesmerized by what is happening between the lovers: as Amélie holds out her hand, Samuel takes it and tenderly kisses it.

Behind me, I hear a crash. I turn to see John’s pallet on the floor.

Montesquiou’s white suit is marred by a slash of red paint. The Count holds his hand to his cheek. His lip quivers angrily.

Appalled, John stares at him. Noting my amazement, he casts his eyes downward.

Oddly, John holds his paintbrush to his chest. Its tip drips red paint.

Did his clumsiness cause the accident? If so, is he afraid that Montesquiou will speak ill of him to Pozzi? Or worse yet, to Madame Gautreau?

Perhaps my concern is misplaced. As much as Montesquiou despises her, she detests him even more.

In fact, their mutual hatred may work in John’s favor.

I hurry out the door with the parasol.

I run to the curb to find the lovers’ hands still clenched.

Seeing me, Pozzi drops his arm to his side.

I thrust the parasol at him. “Madame Gautreau forgot this.”

Silently, he takes it and hands it to her through the window.

As the fiacre takes its leave, Amélie stares out at me. Her tears have created streaks in the powder that creates her celebrated pallor.

Pozzi follows me upstairs. When we reach the studio door, he says, “Montesquiou doesn’t like the portrait. His opinion will change as he and John become closer.”

With as much calm as I can muster, I declare: “Sir, trust me when I say that only your opinion matters to John.”

“He has no worries there. I like it very much. It is as if he sees my soul.”

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How do I answer that? Is John aware of the cunning and callousness that lurks there? Or does his quest to paint Madame Gautreau blind him to it?

As if reading my mind, Pozzi laughs. “Madame Gautreau also thinks he has captured me to perfection.”

“Will she be back?” My heart beats anxiously at the thought.

“Doubtful. The painting is almost completed. At the most, there will be one more sitting.”

Good. I prefer she stay away, though I know John feels differently.

For his sake, I hope that the Count is also indisposed.

When we enter the studio, Montesquiou is back on the settee, writing in a tiny notebook. He feigns any notice of our return.

John’s palette is back on its stand. Where the paint fell, the floor is damp. The room smells of turpentine.

Pozzi’s eyes move from Montesquiou, who is scribbling away, to John, who works on the painting’s background. Both men seem oblivious to his stares.

Finally, my brother waves absently for the doctor to take his pose.

Because Pozzi’s face is now positioned away from Montesquiou, he can’t see the streak of red paint that has ruined the Count’s suit.

I’m relieved Pozzi’s portrait is almost complete and in plenty of time before next year’s Salon. I’m sure John feels it can’t come soon enough.

And since my goals are predicated on his successes, I feel likewise.

1882

CHAPTER 12

MARCH - PARIS

The unveiling of Pozzi's portrait takes place tonight.

The event was delayed months later than John had anticipated. Pozzi claimed it was necessary, considering his hospital schedule and John's autumn and winter travel itinerary. Whereas Pozzi has agreed to allow the painting to be displayed at London's Royal Academy of Arts, he has not yet consented to John's request to submit it to the Salon. Louise's portrait and *El Jaleo*—John's painting of the Spanish dancer—have already been accepted. The latter will be showcased in the Salon's illustrated catalogue.

I've come from Nice to help John with his final preparations for his Salon entries. Afterward, I journey to England and Ireland, where I meet up with friends.

Mother sulked when I insisted on holding to my itinerary. But Father agreed, insisting, “She *should* renew her youth.”

I love him for that. As much as I appreciated the sentiment, I don't like the inference: that my life is already in retreat. I am only twenty-five! At that age, a horse is put out to pasture—or worse, sent to the glue factory. But a woman is still in her prime.

And an artist who, like John, has already made his mark is considered “on the rise.”

I still have time to make mine.

Now a mere block from 10 Vendome, John takes my hand and squeezes it. “Is that not the infamous Madame Gautreau?”

I follow his gaze. “Indeed.” Such audacity! Is Thérèse still not aware of Samuel's duplicity?

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John's face turns stony with determination.

Pierre is beside her. A servant has just let them through the Pozzis' massive entry door.

Odd: Amélie is as sullen as last I saw her: half a year ago when Pozzi put her in a carriage after his sitting.

As we come closer, the servant recognizes John. He bows slightly and beckons us forward.

John furtively whispers, "I need to speak to Samuel alone."

"Agreed. His answer is long overdue. Tonight's accolades for the painting will make it a given."

"I appreciate your confidence." From my brother's tone, he doesn't share it.

As John described it, the Pozzis' home is grand in size and sumptuously appointed. Rich fabrics in various shades of red adorn any surfaces that aren't marble, ornately filigreed, or artistically glazed.

And yet, the apartment is devoid of warmth and personality.

Samuel strides over to greet us. Immediately, he takes us around for introductions. For such a momentous occasion, the Pozzis have invited few guests: a smattering of physicians and a few of the *haute monde*. The former seems awed by their surroundings and their host. The latter, who must be regulars at Thérèse's *jours*, have congregated around the settee where their hostess holds court.

As I get closer, I notice she is large with child.

No wonder Amélie looks so forlorn.

Pozzi's sitting was in the late fall. Had he informed her of Thérèse's pregnancy that day?

We are introduced to an older woman in widow's weeds seated in the place of honor: next to the portrait. Her resemblance to Thérèse Pozzi makes it obvious that she is the doctor's mother-in-law, Madame Marie-Félicie Loth-Cazalis. Her stoic demeanor does not deter Thérèse's guests from paying her homage.

Count Montesquiou sits beside her. His accessories—hat, cravat, gloves, and kerchief—are lavender like his impeccably cut suit. The flower springing from his buttonhole calls attention because it breaks from his hue *du jour*: a black tulip.

She looks through me. To John, she gives a grudging nod.

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When John acknowledges Montesquiou with a slight bow, the aristocrat responds with a sneer. He ignores me altogether.

I prefer it that way.

A man—sharp-nosed, bearded, barrel-chested—stands on the periphery of both cliques. He waves us over. After giving John a hearty handshake, my brother introduces him as the artist Georges Clairin.

“You, then, are a friend of the Pozzis?” I ask.

“I’ve known Samuel for years,” he assures us. Leaning forward, he whispers: “We share an ardent devotion to the same woman. But only his charms have kept her enraptured.”

John chuckles. “Thérèse is certainly devoted to him.”

Georges’ chortle draws startled glances from the Pozzis’ more demure guests. “I meant Sarah Bernhardt. She is my dear friend too.”

“I saw your portrait of her in the ‘76 Salon,” John declares. “As a student, I found it inspiring.”

Georges shrugs modestly. I’m flattered. To have Samuel as your patron is the highest praise of all. I know this firsthand. For years, he has commissioned me to paint murals in his hospital. He feels pastoral scenes has a calming effect on the patients.” He nods in Pozzi’s direction. “Yet another way the doctor’s bedside manner sets him apart from his peers.”

Someone calls out, “Jojotte!... *Jojotte!*” Thérèse is beckoning Georges to her side. Apparently, he is a favorite.

After Georges excuses himself, I murmur this assurance to my brother: “Think of it, John. Though the doctor and Monsieur Clairin are very close friends, Pozzi commissioned you to paint his portrait.”

“Mural commissions are a gracious handout to an artist who drinks too much and paints too infrequently, usually on a whim.” John retorts.

“Even so, should he consent to have his portrait in the Salon, it won’t be out of pity.”

John’s gaze goes to our host. “True. For Samuel, it is ego. And because your portrait is the biggest testament to it, he’ll want it displayed at the Salon. It’s not just a tribute to you, but to him.”

John’s eyes move to the enormous portrait. Draped by a curtain on a pull string, it sits on a large, low-hanging easel.

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Confidence bolstered, we join the others.

Amélie and Pierre Gautreau are conversing with Thérèse. As he did with Montesquiou, Samuel introduces us as if neither John nor I have already met Amélie.

After John kisses Amélie's proffered hand, he nods deferentially to her husband.

Pierre bows. "I had the honor of meeting Mademoiselle Sargent at the unveiling of Madame Subercaseaux's portrait."

"It was a pleasure for me as well," I reply.

Amélie frowns. This information is new to her.

Unlike the sumptuous dinner at Amalia Subercaseaux's unveiling, servants circle the grand parlor with glasses of Champagne and hors d'oeuvres, allowing John further reason for concern.

Samuel introduces us to Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, whose book he'd lauded during his studio visit.

"From what I've read, your novel has been well received," John tells him.

Perhaps that's the reason Montesquiou is in a foul mood.

Is there a time when he is not? Even title and money must wear thin against the barrage of venom he spews.

Clairin joins us as I query Monsieur Barbey on his novel's plot. The author's answer, long and complex, is just one tune in a medley of conversations reverberating through the great room. A trio of doctors discusses the latest medical procedures in an *obbligato* tone that reflects the gravitas of their subject. The nonet of socialites trills arias of gossip.

Amélie stands in their midst. Though she responds to another guest's question, her eyes follow Samuel as he circles the room.

Determined to have their much-needed conversation, John stays in Samuel's wake. I'm so worried for him that I don't realize Pierre now stands beside me. "Amélie has been greatly anticipating this day."

"I take it, then, she is a great friend of the Pozzis."

"Of Samuel, yes."

Does he suspect their affair? If so, I dare not look his way. I fear my eyes will confirm his suspicion.

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“He saved her life,” Pierre continues. “A year ago, she needed emergency surgery. I thank God for putting her in his skillful hands. To her, Pozzi is a God.”

Doctor God.

The memory of Pozzi’s hand caressing Amélie’s face comes to mind. “I see. A friend—and a savior.”

Pierre shrugs. “To my wife, yes.”

I’m saved from responding because Pozzi is now tapping a knife against his glass to gather his guests.

“**Monsieur Sargent has done his best** to assure that his masterpiece mirrors the man. In my eyes, it does indeed. I am sure you will agree.” As Pozzi reaches for the easel’s pull-string, his guests lean forward in anticipation. “I find the artist’s title apt: *‘Docteur Pozzi Chez Lui.’*”

Madame Loth-Cazalis’ grim face would be more fitting at a funeral than an unveiling.

The curtains are drawn, eliciting a choir of gasps.

Then silence. John’s bold interpretation of the doctor has left the guests awestruck.

The robe’s bright red hue brings the figure to life. We could be seeing Pozzi through the doorway of his bedchamber. His stance is casual. Lust glazes his sidewise gaze.

The portrait implies a man ready for pleasure.

“The likeness is perfect,” Amélie murmurs.

Montesquiou smirks. “Or so you might suppose, Madame Gautreau. For surely you have never seen him in his dressing gown...” His voice trails off as if tantalized by the supposition.

Nervous twitters flutter through the room. Thérèse frowns.

Pierre’s back stiffens. He glares at Montesquiou.

John’s face loses all color. He’s wondering if Samuel also finds his depiction too honest.

From Samuel’s triumphant grin, John has nothing to fear.

There is a greater concern. By creating a masterpiece that so perfectly reveals the sordid soul of her lover, John may have forfeited any chance to paint Madame Gautreau.

With smiles still on their faces, the compliments proffered by Pozzi’s guests truly sound genuine.

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Are they fooling their host? I wonder. Had he seen how quickly their lips drop into smirks the moment they turn their backs, would he realize that they are competent actors, not genuine friends?

Thérèse stands on Pozzi's right. Her face is a mask, placid yet cold. On the other hand, Amélie, on Pozzi's left, seems to glow brighter with each compliment.

"Doctor Pozzi is certainly pleased with your brother's handiwork." Pierre's declaration sends a trickle of trepidation down my spine.

I galvanize myself to face him. "What is your opinion?"

Without hesitation, he replies, "It is a masterpiece. Mr. Sargent has captured the heart and soul of the man."

I remember that Pozzi said the same thing.

Still, I feel the urge to test Pierre's honesty. "You do not feel it is too...." My mind flails in search of the right word: "suggestive?"

Pierre shakes his head. "To my mind, it is genuine. The doctor is no less handsome than portrayed. And he is no less at home than when he's ready to go to bed." Aware that his remark shocks me, he quickly adds, "Unless it is a surgery theatre."

I place a hand over my mouth to cover my shock.

To my surprise, Pierre laughs too.

"You know him well, monsieur."

Pierre's smile disappears. "Samuel takes no effort to hide his intentions."

He knows about his wife and her lover.

"Amélie has broached the subject of having her portrait painted by Mr. Sargent," he adds.

For John's sake, I ask: "Are you still opposed to the idea?"

"Yes," Pierre admits. "For all the reasons I expressed previously."

"And yet, you've just proclaimed the doctor's portrait a 'masterpiece.' Do you doubt John can do her justice?"

Pierre's eyes lose their luster. "Not at all. I don't doubt that your brother would aptly capture her beauty—and that one day, she'd regret it." He points to Pozzi's portrait. "An even bigger concern is that your brother's mastery might expose the true essence of her personality."

I have no counterpoint to that. His apprehension is legitimate.

It is the ultimate proof of Pierre's love for her.

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We part without words.

Neither Pozzi nor my brother is in the parlor. As I pass the small library just beyond it, I hear John's voice: "You've already agreed to allow me to submit it to the London Academy's exhibition. It would be a shame to miss an even bigger opportunity for accolades. The Salon is the grandest showcase in the world."

"Madame Gautreau is right, John. You captured me ideally." Pozzi pauses. "Indeed, so well, that I agree with Thérèse that our parlor will always be its only showcase."

Poor John. To think that his boldest portrait thus far is to be hidden away from those who would recognize it for the masterpiece that it is—and whose opinion has the most gravity—must be heartbreaking.

John's gracious acceptance of Pozzi's decision is declared loudly enough for me to know he is walking to the door.

I enter the parlor in time to hear Montesquiou proclaim, "Taste is a very special thing. Sadly, though Monsieur Sargent is a great painter, he hasn't any."

How dare he spew such venom!

"The doctor's portrait is a masterpiece," Georges Clairin insists. "It transcends the mediocrity of the genre, both in its technique and in the informality of its setting."

"Imagine the accolades it will garner at the Salon," Amélie declares.

"*Quelle horreur!*" Montesquiou shudders at the thought. "I shall encourage Samuel to leave the painting shrouded and in the dark."

He doesn't know John now stands directly behind him. Frankly, I think he would enjoy it.

"There is no need for that," Thérèse insists. "He agrees with me—and *Maman*—that the painting is to stay a... a private affair."

Georges shrugs. "If that's the case, it is a shame."

Not surprisingly, John has no desire to linger.

"**I'm famished!**" I exclaim. We've walked merely a block when I realize I had not eaten a bite the whole evening.

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“And for once, I have no appetite,” John admits. For him to feel that way indicates how deeply he is bothered by tonight’s ordeal.

I’m just about to suggest that there are enough cold meats back at the studio to make a light supper when we hear a voice calling John’s name:

Georges has followed us out the door. He’s portly enough to be winded from the short jog that puts him beside us. Still huffing, he asks, “Are you also on your way to the students’ gathering for Duran?”

John frowns. “I’d forgotten all about it.” He turns to me. “Duran’s students are fêting him at Restaurant l’Avenue—an annual tradition before the Salon. I promised I would stop in.”

“Yes, we should go,” I insist. Being with those who look up to John—a living example of Duran’s success as an instructor—will do my brother some good.

Georges chuckles. “Be honest with her, John. His students do it to curry favor, in the hope that Duran will influence the Salon’s judges on their behalf.”

While he hails a carriage, I tease John: “So that’s the secret to your success.”

“If only it were that simple.” John sighs. “All the more reason my next painting must be grand enough to capture the hearts and minds of all who attend the Salon.”

“*El Jaleo* is grand,” I exclaim. “As is Louise’s portrait. Both will be triumphs.”

He nods, confidence restored. “At least Amélie loved Samuel’s portrait. That bodes well.”

I won’t ruin his evening with Pierre’s verdict. Better it should wait for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 13

Restaurant l’Avenue is the perfect tonic for John. The boîte’s tasty fare and reasonable prices make it a favorite for artists and their friends. Revelers fill every table. Periodic clinks of patrons’ glasses are the staccato note throughout the deafening babble of conversations.

Carolus-Duran’s party spans several tables in the back of the cavernous room. John is not the only artist of note in his mentor’s entourage. Pierre-Auguste Renoir is here, as is Édouard Manet.

We make our way to the head of the longest table, where Duran holds court. He stands to give John a hearty slap on the back. A student beside Duran nudges another to move so that John may take his seat.

Mademoiselle Fannie, who keeps a sketchpad at the ready, immediately places it in front of John. Because he has always taken full advantage of its pages, Others have abandoned any claim on it. Even the waiters refer to it as “L’Album Sargent.”

My shy brother’s real purpose for doing so is to enjoy the boisterous merriment of others without having to participate.

Georges leads me to the only two chairs with a bird’s-eye view of John and Duran. Immediately a waiter takes our orders: chicken stew, bread, and cheese. Without a thought, he places a bottle of red wine and two glasses before us.

While waiting for our food, I ask, “Why does Thérèse not like Samuel’s portrait?”

Georges shrugs. “Any blatant show of sensuality is blasphemous. She even abhors any conversation on the topic. Recently, she was struck speechless at Lydie Aubernon’s salon.”

“I’m not acquainted.”

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“Her salons are run like a general waging battle: setting the topic, assigning the order in which the conversationalists will speak—even for how long. A long-winded guest is cut off by ringing a bell.”

“What joy is there in that?” I exclaim.

“None—except for the brutish hostess. And yet, if the invitation arrives, the beau monde obediently flocks to her side. Gluttons for punishment, are they not?” He scoffs. “On the day of the incident, the topic was adultery. Thérèse turned white at the thought that Lydie would command her to comment—or, for that matter, Samuel, who has no filter if it serves his purpose.”

“And that is?”

“Acceptance—albeit adoration is a close second.”

From what I’ve seen, I can’t argue with either assessment.

“As luck would have it, one of the guests, Madame Laure Baignères, arrived late,” Georges continues. “Lydie’s reprimand was that she initiate the conversation. Imagine Thérèse’s shock when Laure responded, ‘So sorry! I came prepared to discuss incest.’” Georges giggles and then gulps his wine.

“Was Samuel required to comment?”

Georges chuckles. “I’m sure he would have enjoyed doing so—if Thérèse had not insisted that they leave immediately.” He shakes his head. “Poor Samuel. He is a lion married to a church mouse.”

“Like you, Georges, I know the doctor certainly appreciates his portrait, even if his wife does not,” I insist. “In fact, he has sponsored John for Les Merlitons.”

Georges chuckles. “That’s quite a consolation!”

“Why do you say that? Are you also a member?”

He sighs. “I only wish.”

I remember Judith Gautier’s claims about the lascivious acts that go on behind the club’s closed doors.

Noting my blush, Georges roars with laughter, then pours himself another drink.

After a while, the man on my other side turns and acknowledges me with a nod. He is young—perhaps not yet twenty—and quite handsome, to the point that I gasp. He has stark, dark eyes over

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high, delicate cheekbones. His tepid smile acknowledges and then dismisses his obvious attraction to others.

Georges leans over to shake his hand. "Ah, Monsieur Belleruche, you have taken Duran up on his offer to join his atelier."

The younger man shrugs. "Since there's no guarantee that desire goes hand in hand with talent, I'm at a loss as to why it is touted as a necessary step for aspiring artists."

Georges waits until Belleruche turns to the man on his other side before muttering, "Spoken like one with a silver spoon placed firmly in his mouth."

"He is wealthy?" I ask.

Georges nods. "Extremely. And a French aristocrat. Albert's father, Edward Charles, was the Marquis de Belleruche. He died when Albert was a child. His mother, Alice, is one of the great beauties of our time—so much so that her second husband, Harry Vane Milbank, is young enough to be Albert's older brother by a mere eight years. Duran has just completed her portrait. It was commissioned by Milbank."

"I suppose Albert's good looks come from her," I murmur.

"Indeed," Georges concedes. "I hope Duran was smart enough to ask for his fee upfront. Although Milbank is the son of a British lord, he is also a scoundrel. He owes money to everyone. Despite this, he has friends in high places, which must have appealed to Belleruche's widow and Duran, who claims he sat next to the Prince of Wales when the aristocrat was feted at the Milbanks' Mayfair mansion." Georges chuckles. "He was impressed enough with Albert's sketches that he offered him a place in the atelier." Like me, he realizes how much Duran relishes any brush with celebrity.

I shift my gaze to Duran only to see my brother looking at me before glancing down at the pad before him.

I'm being sketched? I flame up at the thought that my likeness will grace the album that amuses the restaurant's artist patrons.

I now realize that Albert Belleruche is looking at me too.

"Duran's special guest seems interested in you," he says.

I smile. "He's my brother, John Sargent."

"Ah, the prodigy! Even now, Duran's atelier buzzes with the dreams of being the next Sargent."

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

“A great compliment to John.”

“And well deserved. He’s a true student of the Masters, including Frans Hals, who is my guiding star too.”

“Then you’ll do well at Atelier Carolus-Duran,” Georges assures him.

Just then, Duran shouts Georges’ name and beckons him. My dinner partner rises and lumbers over, plopping onto John’s empty chair.

Belleroche crooks a brow. “I feel my time is better spent in museums. There, I paint more—much better use of my time than jockeying for Duran’s favor.”

Laughing, I sputter, “You know Duran well. One advantage, though, is that Duran has great influence with the Salon’s jury.”

He grimaces. “One’s art should be the only precursor. Should I apply, I won’t need an endorsement from Duran.”

“For an artist who must also put food on his table, the prestige of placement in the Salon merits a little groveling,” I counter.

Albert smirks. “Though art is my life, it will not be my livelihood.”

“You’re lucky,” I concede. “Creating art for art’s sake is a luxury few can afford.”

The student on the other side of Albert pokes him with the sketch album. “You’ll like this one.”

I look up to find John smiling at me.

Oh!...

Albert opens the album. Tentatively, he flips the pages.

I’m too embarrassed to look.

Finally, Albert finds it. “Your brother truly is an artist. One should be...*honored.*”

Despite my modesty, I am intrigued enough to turn my eyes to the page:

John’s drawing is not of me at all.

He drew Albert.

Though merely a pencil sketch drawn from a distance, every stroke, shadow, and curve brings the man to life. The etching’s lines are so fine that I would not have been surprised if words were uttered through the figure’s full sensual lips, or its limpid eyes swept over me, or its nostrils flared; or if the hand suddenly reached up to sweep away the lock of hair that has fallen onto its forehead.

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As if reading my mind, Albert reaches up and pats the errant curl.

His gaze is now on John, who stands beside a very animated Manet.

“A good likeness,” I point out.

Albert tears the page from the album. Rolling it, he puts it in his pocket.

We look up to find John watching us. Albert nods his thanks. John’s cheeks redden. Praise embarrasses my brother, especially when it comes from one he admires.

Which leads me to ask: “Do you know my brother?”

Belleruche laughs. “No, but I’m sure that will soon be remedied.”

He’s prescient. John excuses himself from Manet and takes Georges’ empty chair.

I introduce them. Immediately, the conversation turns to Duran’s atelier: John points out the pros of learning under Duran, whereas Albert is more cognizant of its cons.

Since Duran finds no purpose in a woman’s opinion, let alone her artistic aspirations, the topic bores me. I excuse myself, informing John I’ll find my way back to our boarding house.

He bids me farewell with a quick kiss on the cheek.

The following day, I knock on the door of John’s room. No answer.

No matter. More than likely, he’s already at the studio. I stop in Madame Derode’s parlor for a quick breakfast before heading there, absconding with two slices of her thick bread, two hardboiled eggs, and a small jar of jam, folding this bounty into a kerchief before placing it in my valise. John would not have eaten and will appreciate the kindness.

I arrive to find John is already painting.

Lately, the canvases capturing his attention are his Salon entries: Louise’s portrait and *El Jaleo*. Instead, he faces a much smaller canvas:

Albert is the subject. The background is so dark that it could be night. The face is angled so that its right side is prominent. The work’s illumination comes from above, highlighting just a part of his forehead and the bridge of his nose. The lack of light makes the angled planes of Albert’s cheeks appear even sharper.

But the shadows created by the arch of his brow subsume his right eye into almost complete darkness. There is just enough light to make out the lid of the other eye.

Though hidden in the shadow of his nose, the bow of his lips is devoid of any mirth I’d witnessed last night.

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The subject is dressed as he was last night. One can barely make out the outline of his dark jacket and vest. And although his white collar is in shadow, its curve emphasizes the young man's slim frame.

"What do you think?" John asks.

"The likeness is exacting. To do it from memory—"

"I mean, what do you think of Belleruche, the man?" Genuinely interested, John leans forward.

"I...I do like him...."

"You hesitate," John replies. "Why?"

"He is..." I pause in search of the right words: "Too beautiful."

"He is that, and much more. In fact, I've asked him to share the studio with me."

Though surprised, I reply, "I suppose sharing the rent will ease your financial burden. And, from what I gathered, Albert's people are wealthy, so it won't burden him. But do you think he's a serious artist?"

"Like any of us, that will be proven over time."

I wince at the implication though I know my brother did not mean it as a slight.

I move toward the table, open my valise, and pull out the pilfered breakfast provisions.

John lays down his brush. "You're an angel!"

"I would have thought the same of you," I huff, "except that Georges reminded me that Les Merlitons allows members to use its private chambers *for sex*."

John almost chokes on his bread. Sputtering, he declares, "Emily, let me assure you that my sole purpose in joining the club is strictly for the food, camaraderie, and the connections. The last thing I wish others to know is what I do—and with whom—in my private domain."

"Forgive me, John. I did not mean to imply... All I meant to say is that perhaps you should reconsider the consequences of such relations—"

He's laughing so hard that he's choking again.

I'm not laughing. In John's quest for Amélie's commission, I worry that he puts too much at stake.

CHAPTER 14

MAY 1 - THE PARIS SALON

“Even without Pozzi’s portrait, John is a rousing success—especially with the critics.” As is his nature, Paul is filled with awe, never jealousy. “André Michel wrote a love letter to *El Jaleo*.”

“I read it,” I reply. Michel’s article on John’s painting of the Spanish dancer, which appeared in *le Parlement*, read in part:

...I have enjoyed the work too much to have the courage to limit my praise of it. She is contagious. After a quarter of an hour, one feels the crazy desire to leap onto the banquettes, which would destroy a critic forever in the esteem of respectable folk...

Le Figaro declared the painting “one of the most original and strongest works of the present Salon.” And a London critic proclaimed: “Incontestably supreme among foreign artists in this Salon is Monsieur John Sargent, the American. His picture of the gypsy dance, *El Jaleo*, seems to have turned the head of all Paris.”

“Even Albert Edelfelt couldn’t find enough words to describe it.” Paul nods toward the Swedish painter. “He called it ‘bizarre, daring, ingenious, and hellishly smart.’”

“High praise indeed—for him, anyway. Albert has always been more enthralled with Mother than with John.” My glance follows Paul’s to where Albert stands beside my parents. “He claims she is the only woman he’s ever met who discusses art like a professional.”

“Do you find the claim unwarranted?” Paul asks.

“Not at all,” I admit. “John is proof of that.” Mother insisted to father that John’s private lessons at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts even after his acceptance to Duran’s atelier. The arduous tests—*concours*—were preceded by weeks of study: two hours in the late afternoon with Monsieur Adolphe Yvon. Then, after a quick supper, two more hours of study with Monsieur Léon Bonnat.

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

Now that Mother has given me hope that I may soon be granted a similar investment, I vow to make the most of it.

Behind us, we hear giggles and gasps. A gaggle of elegantly attired young women surrounds my cousin, Ralph. The milling crowd of ubiquitous grey serge wool bunches them so tightly together that their colorful satin gowns and feathered hats resemble a bouquet of exotic birds.

The women hang on Ralph's every word. "What is Monsieur Sargent working on now? So sorry, mademoiselles—I am sworn to secrecy!"

His proclamation stirs a gust of disappointed sighs.

To hush them, Ralph puts a finger to his lips. "Alright, if you must know...." He leans forward as if his capitulation weighs heavy on him. "He calls his next masterpiece *Daughters of Sin*. He envisions the models—women, of course—naked, lounging on red velvet cushions—"

Another trill of titters flutters through the crowd.

"*O, mon Dieu!*" one of the women exclaims.

"The Salon will never accept it," another warns.

"Oh, but it will—if he calls it something less provocative." He snaps his fingers as if struck with a thought. "Perhaps *Waiting for the Omnibus*."

Their shocked silence gives way to peals of laughter.

I groan, incredulous at Ralph's audacity.

Even the man shaking John's hand to commemorate the purchase of *El Jaleo* is curious enough to look up as John beckons Mother and Father to his side. "This is Mr. Coolidge," he explains. "One of his daughters is married to Lucius Sargent. Another is married to Thomas Newbold. Mr. Coolidge wonders if there may be a connection between our families...."

It's worth seeing Father light up at the thought of kinship, though I'm sure it will stir the inevitable homesickness that keeps him in a perpetual melancholy state. But Mother's face turns to stone. She never envisioned that the sale of one of John's paintings might someday end up in the living room of a distant cousin.

She may never see it again if it leaves the continent or England.

Even if a connection is made and an offer to visit is extended, I'd wager she'd pass on the opportunity.

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

“**Madame Sargent...Madame Sargent!** So wonderful to see you again.” Mrs. Burckhardt’s loud welcome booms across the gallery, where the transfixed throng in front of Louise’s portrait awaits the jurists due at any moment.

Mrs. Burckhardt has timed her family’s entrance perfectly. When she reaches Mother’s side, she offers a boisterous kiss on each cheek.

Mother waits until Mrs. Burckhardt has turned to John before wiping her cheeks with her gloved hand. Violet slaps her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle that would surely earn Father’s disapproval. Thankfully, his back is turned as he peruses the crowd.

John gets the same welcome from Mrs. Burckhardt. Though taken aback, he emits a cordial enough response to her, Mr. Burckhardt, Louise, Valérie, and her husband, Harold Haddon.

Scrutinizing the portrait, Valérie mutters, “What a silly pose.”

Her husband, Harold, smirks but says nothing.

Louise has the good grace to smile coyly at my brother, but there is no overt show of affection. Thankfully, she is not attired in the portrayed dress. However, her hair is coiffed similarly, and her gown is close enough in its design: same sleeves and neckline, same cut, and the color: a gray so light that it’s almost white, like a wedding gown. So that any onlookers make no mistake about the resemblance they see between her and the woman in the portrait, a single rose—albeit a red one—is tied to her wrist.

In the painting’s final version, John bowed to Mrs. Burckhardt’s request for the rose to be white. She’s yet to realize it was a Pyrrhic victory.

“The look in her eyes is filled with such longing,” one young woman exclaims.

“Perhaps she’s the artist’s paramour,” another lady conjectures.

Louise’s cheeks turn red as the rose on her wrist, whereas Mrs. Burckhardt’s bosom juts forward pridefully.

I thank God John is too busy answering questions from *Le Parlement*’s art critic, Monsieur Michel, to hear this nonsense.

Doctor Pozzi enters the gallery with Thérèse on his arm. Count Montesquiou, in a suit and top hat embroidered with large colorful flowers, hovers at her other elbow.

He is enough of a vision that Vi giggles when she sees him.

I pinch her so that she shushes. Now twelve, she should know better.

She hisses back: “But...he looks like *the Mad Hatter!*”

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

A portly gentleman ogles Louise, then glances back at her portrait. “Is this her?”

Pleased that someone has finally noticed, Mrs. Burckhardt nudges Louise forward. “Yes, she is the muse to Monsieur Sargent’s new masterpiece!”

Louise buries her humiliation behind her fan.

Scrutinizing her catalogue, an elderly lady asks, “And what is your name, mademoiselle?”

“Louise...Burckhardt.” The poor girl’s voice is so low that the woman insists on her repeating it.

Exasperated, Madame Burckhardt points to the plaque on the portrait. “It is written there.”

The old woman peers closely. Frowning, she mutters, “*Portrait de Mademoiselle...*’ *Non, non!* It is nameless.”

Mrs. Burckhardt nudges her aside to see this for herself. Realizing the woman speaks the truth, her face falls like a soufflé exposed to a cold gust.

“John, why is Louise not recognized as your subject?” she asks.

“It is not the custom...” John’s perplexed reply dies on his lips.

Unspoken is that those portraits named after their subjects belong to famous beauties, aristocrats, statesmen, or renowned socialites. Louise is none of these.

Grimacing, Mrs. Burckhardt fixates on the painting’s signature.

It reads:

To my friend Mrs. Burckhardt.

John made the painting a gift. And by signing the portrait personally, John has paid her the ultimate insult: he views it as a gift instead of a priceless work of art.

Dismay flashes across the faces of mother and daughter. In unison, brows are furrowed, then a nervous twitch jostles the left corner of their mouths.

To soften the blow, Mother declares, “In *L’art*, Monsieur LeRoi proclaimed that all women dream of being painted by John.”

Count Montesquiou loudly proclaims, “I doubt *this* sitter still retains that fantasy.”

But I can retort, the Salon’s jurists are upon us.

Even Mrs. Burckhardt understands that now is not the time to question John’s intentions.

In time, she will realize that my brother has none. He considers Louise a friend; no more, no less.

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

While Mother moves nearer to the jurists to hear their comments, Albert Edelfelt takes a step closer to Paul and me. Noting the tears in Louise’s eyes, he murmurs, “*S’enflammer à fraud.*”

Sharply, I ask, “What do you mean by that?”

He nods toward Louise. “Isn’t it obvious that she’s enthralled by your brother?”

“If so, she has misread his intentions.”

“The flirtations, the trips with her and her mama, their unchaperoned jaunt... Emily, even the way John posed her for the portrait! He inflamed her desire, then coldly dismisses her—now that she has served his purpose.” Albert glances at Paul to see if our friend supports his theory.

I wince at his inference: that John was cold-hearted enough to lead Louise into thinking his attentions were somehow more than friendship merely for the opportunity to paint her.

“You’re wrong,” I insist.

“Had she been his patroness, would he have insisted on such a silly, suggestive pose?” he counters. “Granted, it serves his purpose: the judges have certainly noticed it.”

Before I retort, Paul murmurs, “Emily, that’s not to say it wasn’t a fair trade. She has a beautiful painting. But be honest: would he have spent so much time creating it if it did not serve his purpose, first and foremost?”

I think of John’s work toward Pozzi’s painting: how it emphasizes all that is vainglorious about the man. He put similar time and effort into Louise’s portrait, whose personality is anything but that. But yes, he has painted her so that onlookers cannot help but notice her.

He captured her at her most pathetic.

Poor Louise.

Just beyond Albert’s shoulder, I catch sight of the Gautreaus. They’ve meandered into the gallery in time to see the impressed looks on the judges’ faces and to hear the crowd’s awed remarks.

Amélie’s suit is jade and embroidered with tiny yellow satin flowers. The rosebuds in her chapeau are also yellow, as are her gloves, heeled boots, and the purse chained to her wrist. A yellow rose is pinned over her heart.

Monsieur Gautreau tips his hat to me, but the turbulent waves of warm bodies flowing between us are reason enough for him to do no more than scan the works of art.

Amélie does not join him immediately. Instead, she stands motionless, like a statue that one only needs to look in the eye for her to come to life.

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

But no one does. All eyes are on Louise's portrait.

Disappointed, Amélie's gaze finally turns to it too. Her cursory glance takes note of the painting's audacious whimsy. She's intrigued enough to allow her eyes to sweep over it. There they stay, transfixed. Despite the crowd's constant motion and endless thrumming, she, too, is in its thrall.

Is she imagining her image hanging on that wall?

She then notices the Pozzis and Count Montesquiou. When they nod in her direction, she forces a smile onto her lips. But instead of making her way to them, she moves toward her husband. Taking his arm, she turns to leave but makes a point to walk in front of John.

Though answering a judge's question, John's eyes follow the woman who has become his obsession.

She knows he watches as she glides from the room.

Pozzi's eyes follow her too.

Watching him, Montesquiou glowers.

As with *El Jaleo*, despite the judges' verbal kudos for Louise's portrait, it does not earn a prize. Mrs. Burckhardt is more dismayed about this than John. Whereas he's lost this opportunity for the formal recognition of his ongoing success, Louise's tether to John is now broken.

The crowd's enthusiasm for the portrait has already earned my brother a new commission. An exquisite woman has cornered him. Her calling card announces her as Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford White. "But please, call me Daisy," she insists.

Daisy is only a year, maybe two, older than us and also American. Her husband, Henry, a diplomat soon stationed in Vienna, stands beside her.

"We have an apartment here in Paris on Avenue Hoche—albeit I do spend considerable time in our Cannes estate as well," she explains. "I assume sittings will not be a problem?"

"Not at all," John assures her.

Mrs. Burckhardt has sidled beside me. "Daisy White, eh? Her people came over with the Mayflower!"

"She seems very nice," I reply.

"That's an understatement! Her social circle spans both continents and all of Britain. *He* is a fox hunter, you know."

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“No, I did not.” Silly woman! Why would that matter?

“I wonder in which of their many great houses it may hang? No matter. It will be an impressive calling card!” Mrs. Burckhardt’s disappointment has melted in John’s newest patroness’s hot, bright glow. Smiling sweetly, she adds, “Mr. Beckwith returns in June. He has written John about this, I assume.”

“I suppose.” If so, I had not yet heard. John has been too busy to mention it.

To my annoyance, Mrs. Burckhardt nudges one of my wayward curls back into place. “Carroll will be joining Louise and me for a holiday. He wishes to see Joinville. Its castle has beautiful gardens. Perhaps you and John would care to join us?”

Is she so desperate to make the match that she feels she must invite me too? I stifle the urge to laugh.

Instead, I murmur, “Sounds delightful.”

I look around. Alas, Amélie has not returned.

Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise.

CHAPTER 15

JULY 28 - JOINVILLE, FRANCE

The river roaring ferociously beneath Pont dit le Poncelot is easy enough to capture in watercolour. I braid broad ribbons of blue—shades of the sky, a storm-swept sea, or a robin’s egg—then cut them with swirling whitecaps that mirror the bridge’s arches. Finally, I stroke grey and black into the swells running between the high riverbanks.

Carroll’s admiring whistle startles me. I hadn’t noticed that he had set up an easel behind me. I glance around to see what has caught his attention.

There is hardly anyone around. Besides being the dinner hour, it has rained intermittently throughout the day, ridding the streets of the usual flow of passersby. I see only a little boy pulling a stubborn puppy behind him on a leash. A woman hawks the last of her freshly baked loaves of bread from her cart. And just beyond the bridge, a man fishes from the river’s edge.

Noting my surprise, Carroll declares, “I whistled in appreciation of your work, Emily.” He points to my canvas. “It’s quite impressive.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” I curtsy playfully. “Frankly, having spent the past few days exploring the fort with our hostess, I’m glad to have discovered a pastime that bores her.”

Carroll chuckles. “Anything that prohibits her incessant questions about John, eh? My apologies. I should have forewarned you about her interrogation tactics.”

“Thus far, I’ve been elusive. She’s obviously frustrated about it.”

Carroll looks around. “I haven’t seen John since lunch.”

“He took Louise for a walk,” I reply. “They went off in the direction of the old fort.”

“Unchaperoned, I assume?”

I frown. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

Carroll rolls his eyes. “Then the deed will soon be done.”

“What do you mean?”

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

“The day I arrived in Paris, John and I were to meet Duran for lunch. On the carriage to the restaurant, I mentioned that Mrs. Burckhardt suggested this holiday and then wrote me that you and he would be accompanying us. We had a lengthy discussion about the Louise affair. He was quite blunt that he doesn’t care a straw about the girl.” Carroll frowns. “I pointed out that he should make his feelings known as soon as possible. I assume he’s doing so now.”

“Thank goodness,” I murmur.

“I could think of a worse fate for John.”

“What?... Than marrying a woman he does not love? Hardly!”

Carroll stares at me. “Do you believe he could forego loving a woman who adores him so greatly, who accepts him unconditionally?”

“Yes—especially if he could never love her back,” I insist. “Isn’t it better for both to wait for the right mates? Eventually, he’ll find the right woman—perhaps after he’s established himself....”

Carroll’s pitying stare stops me. He starts to say something, but the words elude him.

I realize now that he wasn’t talking of John at all but of his own predicament.

“Carroll, I am so sorry if I’ve offended you in any way.”

“Offended...*me*?” He shakes his head, bemused. In truth, he looks relieved. Perhaps he realizes he doesn’t have to be afraid to reveal his concerns to me.

Real friends never judge each other.

So that we might put the awkward incident behind us, I feign interest in his painting. The scene is like mine, but the angle is different. I’m in it, too: perched in my folding chair in front of my easel, a wide-brimmed straw hat tied under my chin with a wide scarf. The shawl covering my back comes to a vee just below my waist, which is quite slim in the picture compared to the broadness of my shoulders.

Carroll has also painted my crooked back. It is slight but still noticeable: at least to me.

Our friendship will never blind him to my deformity.

This disappoints me, although I know it shouldn’t. John will be the first to tell me that a true artist paints what he sees, not how the subject envisions herself.

When we reach the inn, we find a note left for us. Mrs. Burckhardt writes that she suffers from a headache and won’t be joining us for dinner.

“To be expected,” Carroll mutters.

Within a quarter-hour, someone is rapping hard on my door.

I open it, expecting John. Instead, Louise flings herself into the room. Her eyes are damp, and her nose is red. Her clenched fists are raised to her heaving breasts.

She doesn't wait to be invited in but brushes past me, then frenetically stalks the room. I'm too stunned to express my concern. I certainly won't reveal my knowledge of its source.

Finally, she blurts out, "What if I'm doomed to be an old maid?"

No pretensions are needed. Louise is asking me as a friend.

So I answer as one: "You'll find someone who reciprocates your love. It's only a matter of time."

"The only reality that time holds for women like us is loneliness." As she shakes her head, tears fly from her cheeks. "I can't be like...*like you!*"

Flabbergasted, I reply, "What do you mean?"

"Lacking any sort of attraction or charm, thus doomed to—to *spinsterhood!*" She spits out the word like an epithet. "At the very least, John and I share a fondness. And I have no issue with a matrimonial friendship. Surely, he understands it would serve both our purposes!"

More shocked at her stupidity than astounded at her cruelty, I can only muster: "Why on earth would you think that?"

"Because... Because men who cannot love women still admire them—and many do so, greatly." Noting my incredulity, she adds, "Fondness is still a love of sorts. And it provides a tolerable means to an end for both parties. John of all people must realize this!"

John—*cannot love women?*

This absurdity deserves the truth: she and the rest of the Burckhardts were merely stepping-stones in his career.

If I must open her eyes to this reality, so be it. "You're wrong, Louise. 'Fondness' does not supersede other traits important in a happy union: attraction, for example."

Hit with the hot blast of my anger, Louise melts like butter. I'm being vicious, I know—but I'd been crueler still, I have added, *and a functioning brain.*

"Forgive me! I...I spoke out of turn." Louise's dazed stare is eclipsed by a shadow of pity.

She...pities me?

As she walks out, I resist the urge to slam the door.

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I go to my basin and splash my face with water. I don't want John or Carroll to see how upset I am. I could never repeat Louise's silly assumption about John!

If Carroll is right—that John somehow led her on—then shame on him.

How I look forward to the day I'm at an atelier and John must deal with his patrons' silly manipulations on his own.

1883

CHAPTER 16

JANUARY - PARIS

John looks up from his *oeufs en cocotte*. Slapping the letter in his hand onto the table, he declares: “Were you aware that Ben knows Amélie Gautreau?”

With a sigh, I put down my coffee. “What difference does that make? The Gautreaus show no interest in having her painted by you—or anyone else, for that matter.”

John joined Mother, Father, Violet, and me in Nice around Christmastime and will stay with us until the end of the month. It’s all the time he can spare, considering the numerous commissions that have come his way since last year’s Salon: the four young daughters of Edward and Isa Boit; both Mr. and Mrs. John White Field; Madame Boussenet-Duclos; the sister-in-law of Ramón Subercaseaux, Madame Eugenia Errázuriz; and two of Madame Escudier.

So many. And yet, the one he obsesses over still eludes him. “I have nothing to lose, Emily—and a lot to gain. Ben’s family has hosted Pierre in Cuba. He’ll be in Paris next week. Perhaps coming from him....”

John leaps up, strides to the desk, and pulls out paper and pen. “I shall write Ben now, asking him to plead my case.”

“Will you be upset if his efforts are for naught?”

“Of course, I will. But at least I will have tried one last time.” He scribbles away.

Finally, he beckons me to his side to read it.

After a few pleasantries, he’s quick to the point:

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

I have a great desire to paint her portrait and have reason to think she would allow it and is waiting for someone to propose this homage to her beauty. If you are “bien avec elle” and will see her in Paris, you might tell her that I am a man of prodigious talent...

“Well,” I say, “at least you’re not shy to point out that he should sing your praises.”

“At this point, Madame Gautreau and I are beyond silly pretensions of modesty.”

“You’re right as far as she goes,” I retort. “Her immodesty is why Monsieur Gautreau has refused all requests for a sitting.”

My warning is of no use. John reaches for his coat so that he may post the letter immediately.

I welcome the effort if he means what he says—that he’ll take another no as the final answer.

Two weeks later, John hands me a letter addressed to him. The seal belongs to Pierre Gautreau.

I read it slowly:

Madame Gautreau and I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the possibility of a commission. Should this be agreeable, please write back with a time in which you can accommodate us.

—*Pierre Gautreau*

I hand it back. “I take it Ben was successful in at least getting you an audience.”

“I’ll leave for Paris immediately.” He makes his way to the door but then stops and turns to face me. “You should accompany me.”

“To Paris?”

“Yes—and to the meeting.”

“But... Why?”

“Because Monsieur Gautreau considers you honest and forthright—two traits that may reinforce his belief that I’m the right choice for the commission.”

John would be crushed to lose the project to another artist.

“Of course, I’ll go.”

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

“We must pack immediately.” He bounds out of the room, leaving me to wonder how to tell Mother that her nurse has had a much better offer.

She’ll accept the inevitable. After all, John’s work comes before anything else.

The Gautreaus live in the recently developed Seventeenth Arrondissement, which sprawls west and north of the city, just beyond the Ninth. To its south is the vast Parc Monceau. It sits on a hillock, allowing views of the older parts of town.

Our carriage maneuvers Rue Jouffroy d’ Abbans, a broad boulevard with wide sidewalks boasting heavy-limbed trees. Number 80, an imposing mansion, is four stories tall. The butler, a swarthy older fellow, answers the door. The few words he utters are laced with a Spanish lilt.

He walks us into a grand parlor. The appointments are sparse. There are no antiques, but the new furnishings are well made if simple and accessorized in the latest rage: *Japonais*, an exotic touch to an otherwise bland decor.

In time, we notice a pair of sliding doors between the parlor and another room. It is dark except for two short, globed torchieres on either side of a chaise where Amélie lounges, book in hand. Behind her, on a sideboard, is a photo of her, Pierre, and a little girl. John had mentioned they have a daughter named Louise.

Because of how the lamps are positioned, their light illuminates both sides of Amélie’s face evenly and softly. She is dressed casually: in a long satin kimono of the palest shade of blue. Its high neck, dropping to a vee at her breast, is yet another of her many sharp angles: her pointed chin, hollowed cheeks, and the aquiline nose that gives her the distinct profile that makes her a perfect subject to paint.

John’s eyes glisten with the desire to do just that.

The rustling of papers comes from another part of the room. A wall of books stands behind the desk where Pierre Gautreau sits, reading a document in the dim light of the green-shaded lamp. Realizing our presence, he lays down his work and strides toward us. He doesn’t shake John’s hand. Instead, he nods and then motions toward the two chairs and the settee that flank Amélie’s chaise. He waits until we’ve seated ourselves on the chairs before taking the settee.

Because Amélie does not move to allow her husband to sit beside her, I cannot gauge their solidarity in this endeavor. Is Pierre serious about the commission, or is he merely appeasing his wife’s request to at least have a conversation about it?

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Finally, Pierre speaks: “Monsieur Sargent, Amélie wishes to be painted by you. Please validate your interest in doing so and the process it entails.”

So it begins.

John knows his work speaks for itself. Otherwise, the Gautreaus would not be considering him for the commission.

Instead, like Scheherazade, he gives an enthralling tale about his creative process:

How each stroke on canvas must allow the viewer to imagine the sitter coming to life—not just by producing a rendering of their physical traits but by exuding the image with the sitter’s personality;

By first studying his subject—her clothes, her home, the items she surrounds herself, and those people she holds most dear—the rendered image is much more than a painting. It comes alive for the viewer;

And how, beyond being a lifelike reflection of the unique beauty that is Amélie, he envisions the viewer will hear and feel and touch—and innately *know* her.

When he has no more to say, no one speaks.

Finally, Amélie finds her voice: “What is the first step?”

This is when John realizes that his fairy tale has a happy ending. In this story, he is the charming prince, and his princess, Amélie, has accepted his fealty with open arms.

He will now save her from the evil of never having been immortalized in tinted oils slashed, dabbed, scraped, and dabbed yet again onto a full-length piece of stretched canvas. Be it this grand parlor, the Paris Salon, or other such notable exhibitions, she can revel in the knowledge that she will always have a place in the memories of those who stop and stare, hypnotized, by—as John once so fervently murmured—this strange, wondrous creature.

At my brother’s behest, he and our hostess head off to her dressing room, where they’ll choose the gown that will change John’s fiction into artistic fact.

The agreed-upon commission: five hundred francs.

“**Must Amélie go** to Monsieur Sargent’s studio to be painted?”

Pierre’s question takes me by surprise. “John prefers it. There, he has everything he needs to do justice to the task.”

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“But he has painted his subjects in their homes, has he not?” Pierre insists.

“When requested, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Sometimes, my business takes me out of the country. I may not always be around to chaperone Amélie. Of course, her mother, Madame Avegno, would relish the role....” He sneers at the thought.

“John appreciates it when I am in the studio, especially if it gives the sitter comfort,” I explain.

Pierre looks away, then mutters, “But the sitter may prefer her friends.”

What is unspoken between us is what we both know is his actual concern: Amélie may wish to use her sittings for liaisons with Samuel.

The tender moment I’d witnessed between them comes to mind. But I also remember the cruel exchanges between her and Montesquiou; and the strange incident between him and John.

I then think about the kindness Pierre extended to me. He deserves my candor. “Monsieur, John will accept any terms you request of him.”

“That’s good to know.” Pierre’s attempt at a smile dies before it reaches the corners of his mouth. “But I made the request to you, knowing I have no right to do so. It is not your place to observe the behavior of your brother’s patrons.” He bows his head. “Please forgive me.”

I say nothing. If I were to answer him, I would have told him that one who so openly loves another as he does Amélie can be forgiven most any sin.

“To that end, I will not make any demands on Monsieur Sargent other than he approaches the project with the same craft and conviction that he demonstrated in the first painting I saw of his—that one of you.” Meeting my eye, Pierre adds: “One cannot stop fate.”

I have no answer to that.

From this moment on, Amélie’s fate is intertwined with John’s. My brother will assure it.

As for Pierre’s or mine—or Pozzi’s, for that matter—I would venture to guess we will be a footnote to any notoriety that John or Amélie attain, together or apart.

CHAPTER 17

APRIL

"**This will do marvelously** as a studio. Don't you agree?" John opens his arms wide as if seeking an embrace from his new home, 41 Boulevard Berthier, in the Seventeenth Arrondissement.

The move is sound, mainly if Madame Gautreau's portrait receives the anticipated acclaim.

I've arrived just a few days before the opening of this year's Salon. I had no purpose of staying in Paris without Pierre's insistence that John paint Amélie at their home or that I am present for sittings at the studio. Instead, I rejoined the rest of the family.

In the meantime, John leased this little house with the notion that its second story would serve as his studio. Besides a cushioned bench, upholstered chairs, a round table, and a settee, a simple solution for a portrait's backdrop can be found by putting the sitter in front of the moss-colored drapes that hang on the high thick rods protruding from the walls beside the studio's tall windows. John found Persian carpets to lay down when patrons are about but can be rolled up to avoid the inevitable paint spatters. A narrow staircase leads to a loft for those who must change into their sitting wardrobes. It is furnished with a three-sided mirror, a chifferobe, and a daybed.

Of course, John's piano, his butterfly collection, and the dresser holding his numerous props are constant fixtures. A new addition to these appointments: a coat of Oriental armor.

Noting my awe, he explains: "My tip of the hat to *Japonaiserie*. I bought it from Frédéric Spitzer. His mansion is filled with them from all over the world. Weird, isn't it?"

"At the very least, it should draw your patrons' eyes away from all the clutter." I point to the rolled canvases stacked beneath a sideboard. The overflow fills the room's corners.

As for the rest of the house, the ground floor—with its library, dining room, bedroom, and even a servant's quarters for the newly hired cook and a manservant ("My majordomo," John declares proudly)—has ample space for the rest of John's life.

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“It’s splendid,” I assure him. “Not to mention, your patrons will find the neighborhood a vast improvement over the perennially mud-bound Rue Notre Dame des Champs and its five flights of narrow stairs. No more muddy skirts and twisted ankles!”

John laughs. “When Daisy White saw this place, she almost kissed me. It certainly made up for when Jacque-Émile jeered me for being ‘an artist of the Parc Manc.’”

“Monsieur Blanche is envious because you’ve taken a studio within walking distance of *le tout Paris*’ most coveted neighborhood and have such inspiring neighbors as Joseph Roger-Jourdain,” I counter. “For those of greater talent, even the friendliest quip comes with a sting.”

Adoration fills John’s eyes. “I’ve missed you, Emmy.”

"And I, you, brother." I wipe away a tear. "Now show me Madame Gautreau."

John winces. “Right now, there isn’t much to see.”

And yet, he beckons me forward.

The painting that dominates the room is not that of Amélie Gautreau but of the four young daughters of our dear friends, Edwin and Isa Boit.

The viewer is transported to the grand parlor of the wealthy Bostonians’ luxurious apartment on Avenue de Friedland, near Place d’Etoile. The girls, wearing dresses covered in pinafores, seem to stop, and stare back at the viewer as if interrupted during their playtime. Julia—at four, the youngest—sits on a plush rug with her dolly. With her hands behind her back as if hiding something, eight-year-old Mary Louisa’s pout can be interpreted as mischievous. Two older girls—fourteen-year-old Florence and twelve-year-old Jane—seem annoyed at being interrupted. Florence leans casually against one of the foyer’s two six-foot tall fluted Chinese vases. The family owns six of them, which have made several trips over the Atlantic and back. That they’ve done so without being broken is a miracle.

John painted it over a mere eight weeks last fall, in time for it to appear in the French dealer Georges Petit’s Exposition de la Société Internationale. It was a huge success. Besides the viewers’ and critics’ awe of its unique composition, all were keen to analyze the subjects’ emotions and poses.

Breaking from its spell, my eyes roam to another large easel that holds an immense canvas: almost nine feet tall and four feet wide.

It is blank.

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I stare back at John.

He grimaces. “Before you ask, the answer is yes—I have given up any hope of showing Amélie’s portrait in this year’s Salon. Instead, my only entry will be *Portraits of Children*.” John nods toward the painting of the Boit girls. Exasperated, he adds, “I can’t seem to settle on a pose for Amélie! What seems natural does not necessarily flatter that curious profile.”

The numerous pencil and oil sketches on the wall beside the canvas make his point. They show Amélie in various poses. One is simply her head, in profile. At the nape of her neck, two curls are depicted as wild, unraveling spirals. From them, a scrawl of lines moves upward, indicating hair twisted into a chignon. However, he’s sketched the nose shorter and the ear more prominent than the real ones.

Three of the sketches and a watercolour show Amélie on the settee. In the first one, she reclines with drowsy eyes and one arm flung away while the hand on the other lays across the gathered skirt of her dark gown, which snugly hugs her bodice. Her shoulders are bare except for the ornate chains holding the dress to her shoulders.

In the second sketch, she leans forward and twists around so that the viewer sees the back of the same gown. Its bodice dips to her waist. The skirt, gathered around her legs, rises to reveal the heel of a shoe before its train unfurls on the floor. With Amélie’s face—angled down, half in profile—her brows look heavy, her cheeks seem fuller, and her nose is too long.

The watercolour has her sitting on the settee. The pages of an open portfolio are scattered in her lap. John has her looking down and to the side so that her celebrated profile is in clear view.

In the last sketch, Amélie’s back is to the viewer. she kneels on the couch. One arm is placed on its back while the other hangs at her side. Its fingers clutch a closed book. She stares out a window as if waiting for someone.

Perhaps Pozzi?

It is the only sketch in which her distinctive nose can’t be seen.

“Which do you like best?” John asks.

“The last one.”

A brow rises. “Why?”

“Because she could be anyone,” I admit.

John laughs. “For that reason alone, it won’t be the pose I select.”

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Of course not. It's too personal and, at the same time, too universal. "From what I see here, I take it that the dress is a true black?"

He nods. "She leaves it here, in the loft."

My eyes open wide.

John points to the stairs. "Would you care to see it?"

Gently, I run my hand over it.

Two silver bejeweled chains of brilliants hold the gown on its hanger. The bodice is fortified with whalebone and cut from black velvet. Like a paper heart, the dress's neckline is rounded over the bosom but then plunges deeply between the two halves of the bodice. I blush when I see the depth of the heart's point: barely below the breast.

The separate skirt, made of black satin, hangs straight and narrow in the front, but the frothy folds of its train gather in the back.

The name MAISON FELIX is embroidered on a tiny label on the back of the bodice. When aristocracy and the *beau monde* cross the threshold of this grand establishment, they know Monsieur Poussineau will design the perfect creation for any occasion.

John explains, "It was the one gown in the whole of Amélie's wardrobe that embodies the woman—heart, mind, and soul."

"Then I'm not surprised it's black," I declare. "The siren's call."

John's brow arches quizzically. "Louise's and Fanny Watts' dresses were also black. And Marie Pailleron's as well. Of all colors, black accents a woman's attributes the best."

"If any of those women had owned this gown, would you have chosen it for them?"

John snorts. "You've made your point. By the way, her wardrobe is otherwise devoid of black. She prefers pastels. Oh...and white."

"How...*virginal*."

"Isn't it?" Chuckling, he gazes at the gown. "All the more reason this was the only choice." Slyly, he holds the dress up to me. "Would you like to try it on?"

He's joking. Only a particular type of woman can wear this dress: an alluring creature whose natural wiles will be enhanced tenfold by the brilliance of its design and the richness of its fabric.

On anyone else, it would look silly.

And yet, that wouldn't stop every woman—even me—from desiring it.

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Not that I'd let John know this. Instead, I shrug. "Don't be ridiculous."

He glances at the wall clock. "Wise choice. She should be here any moment."

"Oh! ... Well then, I'll make myself scarce."

John sighs. "I don't blame you. She's as dull as an infant and just as impatient. She makes Marie-Louise Pailleron seem entertaining by comparison."

"Are you finally falling out of love with Amélie?"

John snorts. "'Love?' Is that what you thought? Sweet, darling Emily, in this case, the end justifies the means. In any event, this is our last sitting before the Salon. However, in June, after the Longchamps races, I will join the Gautreaus at their country home: Le Chênes, in Paramé."

He stares at the dress. "Maybe it's for the best. Between all her wardrobe fittings and social engagements, she has broken so many appointments with me that it's impossible to paint her here."

A knock on the front door interrupts us.

If only I had left earlier!

I follow John downstairs.

Pierre stands in the doorway with Amélie. Whereas she sweeps into the room and makes her way to the staircase, he stands at the threshold.

He nods to John. But as he turns to go, he realizes I'm standing behind my brother. Smiling, he walks forward. "Mademoiselle Sargent, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"And you as well, Monsieur Gautreau."

"Can I assume you're here on your annual Salon pilgrimage?"

"Yes, sir, as is the rest of our family."

"Are you acting as Monsieur Sargent's hostess today?"

At that moment, I realize that Amélie has not moved beyond the stairwell's fifth step. Instead, she pauses to unbutton the cuffs on the sleeves of her dress.

"So sorry, no. I've only just arrived. In fact, I go now to help the rest of our family settle into our new quarters."

Pierre's mouth droops. "Let me walk you out," he offers.

I nod, then turn to kiss John's cheek.

Grinning slyly, Amélie makes her way upstairs.

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When we reach the sidewalk, I ask, “Aren’t you attending the sitting?”

“I had only come to drop her off.”

“Yes, I imagine your time is precious.”

“I’m not too busy to converse with a pretty woman on a beautiful spring day,” Pierre assures me. “Is your destination close by?”

“Across the street.” I point to a boarding house just half a block away.

Even after we cross the road, Pierre seems in no hurry to part. He’s set on making small talk: the weather; the recently held Paris Convention of Priority Rights, which created something called a trademark; his pending trip to Chile, where he’ll act as the advocate for this new international treaty with the Chilean government.

I listen, fascinated. What little knowledge I have of Chile comes from Ramón and Amalia Subercaseaux, neither of whom we’ve seen for quite some time.

In time, he observes: “Monsieur Sargent’s progress seems stalled.”

I wince. “Madame Gautreau has a lot on her mind but very little time for it all.”

“As I predicted,” he mutters.

“You know your wife well,” I admit. “In her defense, sittings are grueling for observers—almost as much as they are for the sitter.”

“Some bear it better than others.” Pierre stares at a fiacre that has stopped in front of John’s home. Samuel steps down from it and hurries to the front stoop.

John’s manservant answers his rap and bids him entry with no hesitation. I don’t like the leer on the man’s face.

I feel awful. Had I not detained Pierre, he would not have to suffer with the knowledge of Amélie’s duplicity.

And John’s.

I’d have expected Pierre’s face to have darkened with anger, that he’d fall to his knees in grief, and his voice would quiver with pain for his wife’s folly.

And my heart would break for him.

Instead, Pierre hides all emotion. Only the resignation in his eyes gives him away.

Pierre notices my silence. “You seem surprised.”

“Sadly, yes,” I reply.

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I feel he'd forgive this lie. The simple truth is that Amélie's choices have ceased to astonish me. I've come to expect the worst.

CHAPTER 18

JULY 13 - GARE Du NORD STATION, PARIS

I sit on a bench, sketchpad in hand, scanning the clusters of passersby who, like me, are at the mercy of France's erratic train schedules.

Crossing the English Channel was serene enough that I made an earlier train to Calais than anticipated. I now wait to board one of the hourly trains to Paris, which has just arrived.

I'd sent a letter to John, hoping it would reach him before he left for Paramé to paint Madame Gautreau. Getting no response, I assume he's already there. So, instead of a short reunion, when I arrive in Paris, I'll take the next train east to Lucerne, where I'm to meet up with Mother, Father, and Vi.

Suddenly, I hear my name called out. Paul Helleu is waving at me. As I wave back, I realize that he's with acquaintances. To my astonishment, John and Albert de Belleroyche step off the Paris train.

A pantomime plays out. My brother and Alber are deep in conversation. To get John's attention, Paul pats his arm. John listens, but he doesn't seem to comprehend Paul's declaration. Albert does, though. He gawks as his eyes sweep the distance between us.

When John finally sees me, his mouth freezes mid-sentence. His eyes open wide. My apparent happiness reinforces his tepid wave and hesitant smile.

Right before they are swallowed up by the crowd, he signals his resolve to join me.

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My brother kisses me chastely but hugs me tightly. Paul’s hello is hearty, as is his handshake. Albert nods cautiously. I smile to put him at ease. “Good to see you! Then...you are no longer at Atelier Carolus-Duran?”

“I was less of an acolyte than he’d hoped.” Albert shrugs. “I gave you fair warning.”

“And so you did.” To John, I say: “I thought you were in Paramé with the Gautreaus.”

He frowns. “I’ve been given a reprieve. I’ll explain as soon as we order food. We’re famished.”

While Albert takes care of the porter assigned to secure their luggage, John, and Paul steer me into the station’s crowded cafe. Immediately, John orders a repast of cold meats, cheeses, baguettes, and a bottle of wine.

Paul insists I allow him to glance through my sketchpad. Reluctantly, I do so.

By the time Albert reaches us, John has divulged, “I was to arrive in Paramé last week. But Amélie sent a telegram asking me to come in a fortnight. I had already sent the canvas there in anticipation of her vow to pose for me night and day for two weeks. I’d hoped that a venue change would mean fewer distractions. Apparently, she’s found different ones, but no less burdensome on her time and attention. She’s hopelessly lazy.”

Paul laughs. “John has just discovered that the *bon monde* travel in packs, like wolves.”

“Despite Amélie’s vow, I anticipate she’ll make all sorts of excuses to shorten our sittings,” John mutters. “At least the Gautreaus have a piano. She plays tolerably well. I’ve taught her some simple four-handed duets. But mostly, I play. It gives me something to do during those interminable breaks when she reapplies her toilette.”

Albert smirks. “If Madame Gautreau is so anxious to look ghastly, why not suggest she just slice open a vein? There’s no quicker way to rid one’s face of color.” Noting my horror, he adds: “A bigger crime is thinking that blue is an attractive color for powdering one’s face—not to mention it is driving John crazy to capture the hue without presenting her as a corpse.

“Don’t be so cruel, Baby Milbank. You’re scaring Emily.”

I roll my eyes at John’s droll endearment.

Laughing, Albert explains, “Your brother thinks that by likening me to my scoundrel stepfather, I’ll be less of one myself. It’s certainly not inherited. Regarding any devious behavior, I am my own man.”

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

With the arrival of our food, John explains, “We’re leaving the city not a moment too soon. Bastille Day is two days off, and already Paris is crazy.”

“It is madness!” Paul opines.

Sipping my wine, I ask, “Where are you heading?”

“The Frans Hals Museum,” Albert explains.

“Ah, a pilgrimage!” I exclaim.

At the end of the meal, Paul leans in and whispers something to John. At first, my brother seems surprised by our friend’s aside. Shyly, he shrugs. But Paul is persistent. Finally, John relents. He turns to me: “Emily, why don’t you join us in Haarlem?”

I choke on my bread. When I can speak again, I croak, “But...I don’t want to intrude—”

“You’ll be no trouble at all,” Paul insists. “We’ve been there enough times that our copyist permits are in good standing. We’ll vouch for you too. Then once we’re inside the museum, each decamps to the gallery that suits us. We may not see each other for hours.”

Albert adds, “You’d be most welcome.”

John waits for my nod. Receiving it, he stands up. “Then it’s settled. I’ll send Mother a telegram informing her of your change in plans. Hand me your ticket so that I may exchange it.”

Despite the kindness proffered by his friends, I can’t help but feel that John finds my presence disconcerting. But he grins when he returns and finds us sharing a laugh over some silliness between two of the waiters. “I’ve moved us to a private car both there and back,” he announces.

Now that his friends are open to my inclusion, he’s also settled on the idea.

We arrive late in the evening but find an inn near the museum.

The next day, we walk in an hour after its opening. Several centuries ago, the museum was established in what was once a church cloister. It has many large halls, but I find myself drawn to one of the smaller rooms, once a prayer alcove.

There, I come across a portrait called *Lady with Gloves*. The subject was an older, imposing woman. The large square gold buttons on her dress jacket and her dangling pearl earrings indicate her wealth. Hals painted her gloves to look thick and stiff, with a sheen: patent leather instead of silk or satin.

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Her tight demands that I prove myself worthy of being in her presence. I'll spend the day attempting to do just that.

When we were children, during our museum visits, Mother insisted that any illustration we'd started was to be finished before beginning another. It was how we learned to study a picture; to pace ourselves instead of scribbling away capriciously, thus wasting paper.

Our patience was rewarded with the skills now making John's fame and fortune.

They'll serve me well too.

I still have many of those childhood projects. I keep them in a trunk that goes with me everywhere. The weight of enough paper eventually feels as heavy as stone.

And yet, I would never jettison it from my life. It holds my memories, my history, my legacy.

I know John feels the same way. The numerous trunks residing in his studio are proof.

So that we may spend the whole of the next day at the museum, our return tickets put us on the evening train back to Gare du Nord.

Paul and I share one bench in our private compartment. John and Albert share the other. Between the rocking and the wheels clacking over the track, we are soon lulled to sleep.

At some point, I am aware of rustling and open an eye. Paul is gone. John is fast asleep. Although the train car's oil lamp is not lit, there is enough moonlight to see that Albert is sketching my slumbering brother.

When John sighs, Albert's pencil stops. Instinctively, I close my eyes. I wait a moment before opening them again. When I do, I see that Albert is crouching close to John. A finger gently grazes my brother's forehead. Another strokes his cheek.

Shocked, I stifle a gasp.

John's eyes flutter open. Instead of being startled or upset, he smiles at Albert.

Quickly, I close my eyes again until I can no longer resist the urge to open them:

John and Albert are kissing.

My heart leaps in my chest. Panic paralyzes me. Mesmerized, I watch as their lips touch gently, tentatively, before their mouths join with a fierce hunger.

A moment later, Albert's hand skims John's vest. In time, it finds its way through a buttonhole in his shirt. John flinches at Albert's touch. Despite my fascination—in spite of my mortification—I know his first instinct will be to look over at me, so yet again, I shut my eyes.

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This time, I keep them closed.

If only I could go deaf as well! I pretend it's only a surreal dream.

Though stifled, the lovers' moans, gasps, and groans leave too much to my imagination. To a virgin, the act of sex—especially that which is not anticipated, let alone public—is terrifying.

In time, I hear John mutter, “We can't...now.”

Albert groans. Otherwise, both go silent.

I hold my breath to stifle the urge to cry for my brother.

I now realize I don't know the one person I thought I knew best.

At some point, I notice that the train car is silent except for snoring. I open my eyes. It comes from Albert. Both he and my brother are on opposite sides of the bench. They sleep with their backs to me.

Albert's pad has fallen to the floor, open to the sketch. It isn't an intricate or exacting one but Impressionistic in style. In it, John sleeps on his side, facing his portraitist. His head is resting on his square valise. Albert has sketched dark shadows around John's eyes to indicate that they are shut. However, John's hand cradles his cheek, palm up, so his fingers rest on his forehead.

It's an excellent likeness.

As silently as possible, I leave our compartment.

I make my way to an open train car with rows of benches. Paul sits in one, angled toward the window as he reads a book.

Too mortified to make small talk, I take an empty bench farther away, determined to stay awake until we reach our destination.

Instead, I find myself crying.

Horried at this indulgence, I choke back my sobs and wrap my arms around myself to stop my body from shaking while combing my memory for telltale signs of my brother's sexual predilection.

Never was it evident like that described by the odious Count Montesquiou while gossiping about *un mariage de raison* of those aristocrats whose homosexual desires are well known. John has never shown overt inference either, unlike Montesquiou, who demonstrates in his outré way of dress, his feminine mannerisms, and salacious innuendos.

I feel a presence beside me. I'm too ashamed to look over.

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“I take it you did not know,” Paul murmurs.

I shake my head.

He places something in my hand—his kerchief—and sits down.

I nod my thanks and wipe my face. In time, I collect myself. Finally, I turn to him because I must ask: “Have you known all along?”

“No,” Paul admits. “John hides it well. Although there were telltale signs. His capricious flirtation with the Burckhardt girl, for one. His rationale for it seemed false, considering his oft-stated views of her. Then again, she was a pliable subject. Had it been a commission, she may not have accepted the pose that got the painting its accolades.” He pauses, then adds: “Even accepting the obvious—that their personalities made them ill-matched—John kindly ignores the overtures of other women who have the spark, the passion, and the intellect to merit his attention.” Paul shrugs. “To their credit, most insist on staying friends.”

I now know Louise had tried to explain that she was willing to settle for a man who could never show her passion if, at the very least, they could stay friends.

How had she put it? ... Oh yes: anything was better than being an old maid.

Louise doesn’t realize that settling for anything less than passion does not warrant matrimony unless the woman’s dowry is too large to ignore.

For John, it was not.

“Do others know? Edward? Ralph? Or...” I hesitate: “Does Carroll know too?”

Paul shrugs. “We’ve never discussed it.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Why is that? John is a good man—honest, kind, and generous. I would go as far as saying John is a *great* man—more so because he is discreet about his yearnings. Many such men are not. If they are careless with their own reputations, how can they safeguard that of others?”

“It really does not bother you—John’s...preferences?”

Paul grins. “Dear Emily, I am French. To us, love is simply that: ‘amour.’ *Pour comble*, whereas homosexuality is merely tolerated, Sapphic love affairs are *en vogue*. As for John, specifically ... Well, he is one of a kind. He does not encourage false friends. I’m honored to be amongst them.”

I take his hand in mine. “Thank you for your candor.”

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

Paul shrugs. “Life is too short for us to apologize on God’s behalf. We are all made in His image, are we not?”

Overcome with exhaustion, I lean on his shoulder.

I think of Vernon’s teasing of John. I then remember his assertion of her lesbian tendencies. Why was I blind to what is now so obvious?

And yet, unlike John, Vernon—our dearest, oldest friend—has no issues owning her true disposition and openly declaring her feelings for Mary. Vernon prodded him to declare himself to her—perhaps also to the world.

Doesn’t she understand that the revelation would ruin him before he has had the opportunity to prove himself as an artist?

Or, for that matter, even after he has established himself?

Then again, why should it?

Nothing about John has changed. He is still the brother I love.

The brother I revere.

Here and now, I make up my mind to keep my brother’s secret.

Even to Mother and Father. The latter would be heartbroken, whereas the former would see it as a betrayal of all her efforts to cultivate his career.

Hours later, when the conductor shakes us awake with the information that we’re finally at Gare du Nord, I find my head on Paul’s shoulder.

Before disembarking in Paris, John and his friends walk me to the platform that will carry me east to Lucerne. Paul gives me a warm hug goodbye. Albert follows suit but with more reserve. They walk away, leaving me with John.

“So, you must leave immediately for Paramé?” I ask.

“In a day or two—when I’m summoned,” John smirks. “In the meantime, I’ll complete one of Eugenia Errázuriz’s portraits.” Hesitantly, he adds, “I’ll also continue the experimental piece that inspired me to take this holiday: I want to emulate Hals with a tableau I’ve already begun. The goal is that it looks as if it was painted in the sixteenth century.”

“You’ll hire models to pose for it?”

“No need, now that I have the perfect one at my beck and call.”

“Whom would that be?”

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“Have you forgotten? Baby Milbank is now sharing my studio.”

“Yes, I had,” I murmur.

Despite my impairment, I refuse to give up hope that I may find love. Nor have I the right to begrudge John where and how he finds happiness.

The train’s whistle warns me to get onboard.

My anguish doesn’t register with John. Instead, he quickly kisses my cheek and waits until I reappear in a window to wave goodbye.

CHAPTER 19

EARLY AUGUST - UNTERSEEN, SWITZERLAND

“**Must I always** be your subject?” Violet grumbles. “Posing is such a bore.”

“Only three years ago, you begged to pose for John,” I remind her.

“Had I done so, I’d be a celebrated beauty now,” she retorts.

“You’re only thirteen. You have plenty of time to become one,” I tease. “Who knows? Maybe my painting of you will grant that wish.”

Vi snickers and then rolls her eyes. Obviously, it’s more my fantasy than hers.

If only she realized how winsome she looks! I have her lying on a blanket in a verdant meadow near the ruins of Weissenau Castle, one of many recurring locales on our family’s annual summer stops. Though the third week of August, the majestic peaks of the Bernese Oberland, rising behind her, are still blanketed in snow. In the cobalt sky, wispy tendrils of clouds float slowly through the air in sharp contrast to the yellow ribbons of Vi’s straw hat, which, like startled sparrows, periodically take flight in a capricious breeze.

I sigh as she breaks her pose to pick up a stone the size of her palm. Tilting her head, she scrutinizes me. “I don’t know how you do it, Emily. Sitting on that little chair, hours on end.”

“It’s what artists do.”

“Life is too short to stroke paint on a canvas, hour after hour, to impress Mother,” Vi declares.

“I don’t do this for Mother,” I retort. “I do it for myself.”

“In your quest to attend art school, Mother holds the purse strings—or, I should say, John does. At least you can rest assured that even if Mother recommends otherwise, he will do right

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enough by you.” She tosses the stone across the placid face of the lake. Watching as it skips four times before sinking, she squeals gleefully.

I’m too concerned by her statement to applaud her antics. “Why would you say this about Mother?”

Violet shrugs. “I’m not stupid, nor am I a child anymore. I’m thirteen! And I love you enough to want what is best for you. Ideally, it would be a husband who sees all of you beyond the obvious.” Instinctively, she glances at my back. “Not to worry. My husband will be grand enough to support us all, including you.”

“There is no guarantee that you will marry, let alone fall in love with a wealthy man,” I chide her. “Life is a journey with many twists and turns. Few end up as they start out, let alone as they assume.”

“For the wealthy, nothing changes.” Vi’s smile is implacable. “And I shall have lots of children so that they are never lonely and may look after each other—”

Vi hushes when she hears Mother’s shout. We turn to see that she is waving something with one hand and beckoning us with another.

I don’t want to pack up my paints, but Mother’s excitement and Violet’s restlessness mean this moment is over.

At least Violet is kind enough to carry my easel from the meadow.

“**John is out** of natural rose madder and Mars brown,” Mother explains. “The closest colourman to Paramé is Vieille & Troisgros in Paris, but a special delivery will take at least a fortnight. He insists you leave as soon as possible and purchase several tubes of each color. You will then take them to Les Chênes.”

“I understand,” I murmur.

“May I go too?”

Violet’s request leaves Mother just as astonished. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Why can’t I go? The Gautreaus have a daughter. Surely, she’d like a companion—”

Mother waves away the notion. “She has a governess to keep her company. Besides, you are twice her age. Her childish games would bore you.”

“But I am bored here!” Vi insists.

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“Then sketch, or paint, or read... Just do something other than complain!” Mother glances at me. “Goodness, Violet—why can’t you be more like your sister?”

Disgust clouds Violet’s eyes before they narrow angrily. But her seething sputter dies on her lips when she sees the hurt in my face.

I realize she isn’t mad at me. I know she is reacting out of her fear—of ending up *like* me.

Should I be offended? I’m not. I won’t succumb to her fear.

Or let it be mine.

I may accept my current situation, but I won’t allow it to be my fate.

With all my might, I raise a smile, then take her hand, hoping she can intuit what I am thinking: *I can’t blame you, my dear, sweet, spirited girl.*

She must because she nods before running off.

“I fear what may come of her when we are all gone,” Mother grumbles.

“She’ll be just fine,” I assure her.

I won’t worry Mother with Violet’s plan to avoid my fate at all costs.

Mother adds, “Ah... I’d almost forgotten! Madame Gautreau is upset because she left her hair ornament at the studio, which she insists must be worn for the painting. A crescent hairpin flourished with diamonds. John does not remember seeing it.”

I nod, although I don’t remember it either.

Then again, I’d left just before her last sitting began. Pierre had escorted her in, only to see Pozzi arrive when he assumed Pierre had driven off.

Before arriving at Boulevard Berthier, I purchased the paints John requested.

After beating on the door, my brother’s manservant finally opens it. Though almost noon, he has obviously been sleeping because he is still in his nightshirt. Reluctantly, he steps aside for me to enter. The cook is screaming at him about the mess she found in her kitchen after his drunken return last night.

He ignores her. Instead, he follows as I make my way upstairs, watching closely as I unlock the studio with the key entrusted to me on my last visit. Despite the man’s suspicious glare, I close the door soundly.

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I notice a few new easels in the farthest corner of the room. They hold unfinished paintings that aren't John's. The models used, both female and male, are nude. I recognize Albert's technique.

The easel that held Amélie's canvas is now empty. Only the pinpricks on the wall give any indication that John's sketches and watercolors of her were once there.

Interestingly, the sketch John did of Albert on that first night they met has been framed and hung on John's side of the studio alongside many drawings of Albert in medieval costume.

Could Amélie's diamond hairpin be in the dressing alcove?

I climb its few steps. Amélie's dress is gone from the wardrobe closet, as well as the shoes and the valise holding her toilette items. I turn to the dresser. Three drawers contain costume pieces: hats, tunics, fake beards, tights, shawls, and gowns. Three others are filled with art supplies. I scan the bookcase, which also holds art elements and items that serve as props in John's portraits.

Finally, I look under the bed, which is disheveled. I find a woman's stocking.

The blanket and sheet are gathered at the base of the mattress. When I strip them from the bed, I hear something fall to the floor:

The diamond-studded crescent.

My face warms from the shame of how this small ornamental clip ended up entangled in the sheet.

Poor Pierre. Is she now afraid that he will realize it is missing?

Knowing that John is an accomplice in her affair—unwitting or not—saddens me.

If I were to tell my brother where I found it, would he be surprised? Doubtful. Any discretion on John's part supports his single-minded resolve to make Amélie's painting his next triumph.

I had planned to sleep here tonight, but the sheets have not changed since Amélie and Samuel's tryst. I will instruct the servant to do so immediately...

No, on second thought, I'll lock up the studio and sleep in my brother's bedroom.

But first, I'll make up both beds with clean sheets. John must fire this servant.

CHAPTER 20

The train to the St. Malo station—the nearest to Paramé—runs only once a day from Paris. The journey starts at seven in the morning and is a full day long to accommodate the numerous stops along the way.

I have arrived too late for a ticket on the bench seats filled with the rowdy mobs who will spend their holidays at the seaside resort. I pay extra for a place in a compartment. Considering John's fervent plea, the expense is justified.

There are only two other passengers in the car assigned to me, both men. I recognize one: Pierre Gautreau.

He smiles. "Mademoiselle Sargent—what a pleasant surprise!" He stands up and then opens his arm wide: his invitation to sit with him.

"A delightful surprise indeed!" Instead of a full day of boredom, I'll have the company of a great conversationalist. "How long have you been in Paris, sir?"

"A few days only. Before that, I was in Chile." Pierre eyes me curiously. "Your brother has summoned you to Les Chênes on some mission, I take it?"

I blush at the thought of the crescent hair clip wrapped in a kerchief secreted in my purse. I doubt Amélie would wish me to admit my knowledge of its loss, let alone where it was found.

I'm saved from any response by the whistle announcing the train's imminent departure.

At the same time, the compartment door opens again for yet one more passenger:

Samuel Pozzi.

Wariness comes with the twitch of his mustache. And yet, he's able to raise his lips into a smile. But then his eyes roam to my seat companion, and even this little pretense fades.

Pierre's eyes follow mine. His smile fades at the sight of his wife's lover. To cover his concern, he rises and holds out his hand.

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“Ah, another joyous reunion!” Samuel’s gaiety is forced. “Madame Avegno warned me your return from Chile was eminent.”

“And yet, you chose to ignore her.” Despite this cold rejoinder, Pierre takes Samuel’s hand, then sits beside me. “I take it your coastal excursion is at the behest of my mother-in-law—and my wife?”

“I journey farther: to Belle-Île, to be with my dear friend, Mademoiselle Bernhardt.” Hesitantly, he adds, “Learning of this, your family extended the kind invitation to stay the night.”

“It’s a shame that your time with us is so short.” Pierre’s dismissive tone belies his declaration.

“And you, Mademoiselle? Is your presence here merely a happy coincidence?” Pozzi only asks to change the subject.

“My brother urgently needed paints unavailable in Paramé.”

At that moment, the train jerks into motion. I am jostled against Samuel and then Pierre.

Samuel takes this as his cue to move onto the bench with the other passenger. There, he focuses on the newspaper in his hands. Pierre’s smirk registers his relief that he and Samuel have an excuse to ignore each other. When he notices I still hold my satchel, he asks, “Shall I?” He points to it and then to the luggage berth above our heads.

“Thank you.” But before handing it over, I pull out my portfolio and a pencil.

“Ah, you have your brother’s gift,” he exclaims.

“I’m working toward that end,” I admit.

“May I?” He holds on to the portfolio but waits for my nod before turning the pages.

I follow his eyes as he moves from one sketch to another. The ones that interest him most are my watercolors. If the locale is not recognizable, he asks where it was painted.

His eyes gleam with delight when he comes to my most recent painting—that of Violet in the Bernese Alps. “I look forward to seeing how your brush captures Les Chênes,” he murmurs. “The surrounding woods are beautiful, as are the gardens—although not as spectacular as those in Belle-Île.”

“I can attest to that,” Samuel adds.

“At Mademoiselle Bernhardt’s estate?” I ask.

Samuel snickers. “It’s hardly an estate. A mere bungalow. And the last thing she wants to do while there is any gardening.”

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“Belle-Île’s greatest attraction is the chateau known as Vaux-le-Vicomte,” Pierre explains. “It was built by Louis XIV’s superintendent of finances, Nicolas Fouquet—with funds he had stolen from the king, no less. Though warned of the theft, Louis le Grande did not believe his financier was capable of such audacity. The Sun King’s suspicions were raised only while attending Fouquet’s ostentatious inauguration of the grand manse. No doubt the monarch took note of the chateau’s lavish appointments: the work of thousands of craftsmen from the neighboring villages. And then there was the massive garden. Symmetry reigned within the unending avenues of flowers, shrubs—even orange trees—intercut by statues and fountains. From the staircase, the grounds seemed to end beyond the horizon—an optical illusion created by an artful distortion of the landscape elements. For the event, Moliere had been commissioned to produce a play. Afterward, there were fireworks.”

“My, my!” I exclaim.

Even Samuel is intrigued enough by the tale to lower his newspaper.

“When Louis the Great was shown to his guest quarters, no doubt they were luxurious,” Pierre continues. “Still, he had every right to wonder if Fouquet’s chambers were even more sumptuous. Then, glancing out the window, the king noticed an odd clearing on the estate’s grounds. He remarked on it to Fouquet. The next morning, the king realized the clearing was gone—replaced by a forest of fully grown trees. At that moment, the Great Monarch understood the extent of his trusted advisor’s duplicity. Fouquet ended up imprisoned in the basement of the Pignerol fortress for the rest of his life.”

Samuel lowers his paper. “The lesson there: don’t deny what you see with your own eyes.”

“I never have,” Pierre replies.

Samuel glowers back.

Ignoring his rival, Pierre turns to me. “Mademoiselle Sargent, perhaps tomorrow we shall accompany Doctor Pozzi to Belle-Île. That way, Amélie has one less distraction that detains your brother’s project.”

“It’s a generous offer, but I won’t be staying on,” I reply. “Tomorrow, I plan to take the train back to Paris and then Bern.”

“Nonsense!” Pierre declares. “You may stay as long as you want. Our abode is filled with guests at all hours and for days on end. You can attest to that, Pozzi. Am I right?”

“Most certainly,” Samuel admits.

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“There you have it, Emily—and from one who regularly outstays his welcome,” Pierre states matter-of-factly.

Just as disconcerting is how Pozzi now chooses to ignore him on our long journey.

In fact, until the train pulls into St. Malo.

Pierre is surprised to see his carriage waiting for him. “I sent no message ahead of my arrival,” he murmurs.

All is explained when Amélie pulls back the window’s curtain so that she may scan those who, like us, are making their way from the station. She spots Samuel first and calls out his name, not noticing that Pierre and I are just a few steps behind him, keeping track of the porter who carts our luggage.

I realize the exact moment that Amélie notices me: she rolls her eyes skyward. But when she sees Pierre, her face changes color.

Guilt has a singular hue. Unlike fear, the blood doesn’t drain away. Nor, as with anger, does it rush to the surface darkly. Instead, like tentacles, a sickly chartreuse tint creeps up from the neck, subverting even Amélie’s lavender chlorate of potash-lozenge mask.

I glance over at Pierre. Although one sees similar shadings in resignation, despair has its own color: the gray tinge of grief.

By the time we reach the carriage, Pierre’s florid coloring has returned.

His wife’s prim kiss on the cheek is proffered with a greeting that bobs on the choppy flow of her many emotions: “What a surprise to see you back so early, my love! ...”

LES CHÊNES, PARAMÉ

CHAPTER 21

The Gautreau estate sits amid a vast forest. I'm not expecting the carriage's sharp turn onto a driveway, plunging us deep into a thicket of grand oaks that cast heavy shade on the spindly pines and stark white birch trees growing beneath their thick canopy of leaves.

In time, the carriage comes into a clearing revealing a fairytale castle.

Le Chênes' walls are made of stucco outlined with brick. Its entry steps surround a circular turreted tower that juts out from the center of the four-story building. Within the turret's witch's cap is a fifth story that sports dormers all around and is crowned by a weathervane.

The chateau is surrounded by an emerald lawn. Walkways intersperse its formal flower garden. A wide, roaring stream runs beside the estate, interrupting the forest's intrusion on the estate's far side.

John is there to meet us. He crushes me to his chest as I step down from the carriage. "Thank goodness you're here," he whispers.

I don't answer. I find it more prudent to wait until after the salutations from the others who have also come out to greet us. Pierre introduces me to Amélie's mother, Madame Avegno, and his five-year-old daughter, Louise, as well as the child's "*bonne d'enfant*"—that is, her governess, Mademoiselle Pauline; and then the housekeeper, Madame Boucher.

Judith Gautier is also here. Amélie looks on jealously as this mutual friend of Samuel's lingers at his side.

To garner his attention again, Amélie curtly declares, "Doctor Pozzi and Mademoiselle Sargent, Madame Boucher will show you to your rooms." She turns to me. "Yours is across from your brother's."

I nod my thanks.

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“We have been playing tennis all day,” Judith exclaims. “Now that John’s paints are here, he’s bowed out. He’s anxious to prepare for Amélie’s sitting tomorrow.” She sighs at the imposition. “There is still time for a match or two before dinner. Pierre, you, and Samuel must join us.”

Pierre shakes his head. “I still feel the fatigue of my overseas journey. Perhaps Emily would like to play?”

Whereas Judith knows me well enough and thinks nothing of his suggestion, Amélie gawks at the notion. I am sure her biggest fear is that I will end up her partner as opposed to Samuel.

After a full-day train ride in which I was the sole spectator of the verbal jousting between her husband and lover, I am in no mood for Amélie’s derisive condescension. “Sadly, ladies, I’m at my brother’s beck and call.”

“Yes.” John pipes up. “Now that the paints are here, I’d hoped Emily would help prepare for tomorrow’s sitting. Afterward, I’ll take her to her room in plenty of time before dinner.”

Pierre grins. He appreciates my brother’s role in providing my excuse. “Amélie, I am sure Samuel can easily rise to the challenge of taking on you both.”

Amélie winces at the jibe. Like a blind piano tuner, I imagine a guilty wife acutely hears any false note in her husband’s tone, no matter how benign it sounds to others.

She must also realize that now is not the time to be petulant because she tucks her arm firmly into her husband’s. Then, gazing up at Pierre with pleading eyes, she says, “We will make a great duo against them.”

Grudgingly, Pierre nods.

Men aren’t merely bone and muscle. Like women, passion flows like blood through their bodies. Also, like women, despite any knowledge of deceit, even a small effort toward reconciliation pumps new life into the love they once shared.

My brother waits until the Gautreaus, and their other guests have made their way up the grand staircase before muttering, “Even without Pierre and Pozzi, this holiday has been maddening.”

“I would willingly trade you a month with Madame Gautreau for one full day in transit with her husband and her lover,” I retort.

John chortles at that, then takes my hand and ushers me into the house.

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John is painting Amélie’s portrait in a small salon on the west side of the mansion, far from the main hall and the larger rooms. The salon has French doors on its south and west walls. “Besides its exquisite light, I had hoped we were far enough away that no one would disturb us here.” John sighs. “Alas, they always do.”

When I pull the paint tubes from my satchel, John is so happy to see them that he juggles them as he dances a jig.

My giggle is cut short by my awe at the painting. The pose that John finally chose for Amélie is ideal for his purposes:

The viewer sees her straight on. The simple black dress from the earlier sketches is now shown to its best advantage. Where the gown’s heart-shaped décolleté plunges deeply between her breasts, John has painted the ghost of a shadow that enhances their fullness. The gown’s bodice, trussed with whalebone, fits her as tight as a second skin, accentuating her petite waist. Against Amélie’s thigh, her left hand clutches a pair of black satin gloves and the gown’s skirt.

The right arm hangs straight to her side. Its wrist is twisted provocatively so that the dimpled bend of her elbow is exposed. Her fingers, though arched, press on the round side table’s top. Her thumb seems to stroke it.

John has yet to paint the table’s legs. In his process, nothing is an afterthought. I presume its legs will also tell a story.

By having Amélie’s head turned directly to her left, John has showcased the one feature that, above all others, makes her unique: her profile.

A deep copper tone highlights the waves of dark brown hair pulled into a chignon that starts at her crown. But the errant curl at the nape of her neck, which figured so prominently in John’s sketches, is still there to tantalize the viewer.

As for the unusual color of Amélie’s powdered skin (what had one newspaper likened it to? ...Oh, yes, “mother-of-pearl”). John has painted a backdrop of tan layered over ever-deepening waves of brown. A thin black shadow outlines her, making Amélie’s alabaster flesh even more ethereal.

John has tempered the curves in her neck, shoulders, arms—the bends in her elbows too—in pale shades of lavender, rose, blue, and beige. Even the highest point of her ears seems to blush a gentle pink hue.

On her right shoulder, John has painted an outline of the gown’s strap of silver brilliants.

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Oddly, the other shoulder has none.

“Where will you place the chain for that shoulder?” I ask.

“I’m still debating it. But I think it will go here.” John points just below Amélie’s turned neck but before the curve of her shoulder drops into her arm.

“I see,” I murmur. “So that the viewer’s eyes roam up her neck to her profile.”

“Yes, exactly.” Eager to share my excitement, my brother puts his arm around me.

Silently, our eyes sweep over the painting.

“This is your masterpiece,” I whisper.

“I know,” he admits.

John walks me to my room: like his, in the guest wing of the estate. “The family has its own wing.”

“Then Judith is here too?”

He nods, pointing to a door farther down the hall.

“And Doctor Pozzi?”

“I assume he’ll take the one he had last time.” John motions back down the hallway. It is the first on our floor and must be one of the larger suites because the door is far from all others.

So, Samuel has been here during the month of John’s stay—while Pierre was in Chile!

My face must show my dismay because John puts a finger to his lips before beckoning me into his suite.

There are several other canvases in John’s bedroom. All are covered. When he lifts the shroud on one, I understand why he would not want the Gautreaus or their servants to see whom else he has painted: Judith.

John’s style for the painting is like that of the Impressionists. Judith’s features are more imagined than meticulously rendered. By doing so, she appears slimmer and younger. She stands on a sand dune—perhaps near her home in St.-Énogat, a ferry ride from here, on a peninsula that juts out into the English Channel. The viewer is left with the illusion that the wind not only flattens the sea oats at her feet but drives the clouds over her head. She wears a white kimono with long, wide sleeves over a gauzy skirt. So that her broad-brimmed hat doesn’t take flight, she holds it

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firmly to her head with her right hand. The left one lifts the kimono and skirt as if keeping her feet from treading on them: merely an assumption since her feet aren't in the painting.

“Did you paint these here?” I ask.

“Hardly! Pozzi's arrivals catalyze my banishment. Last time, I took my exile at Judith's beach cottage.” He shrugs. “The time spent wasn't a complete loss.”

“It is...beautiful,” I exclaim.

“Yes, well...” John shrugs. “Unfortunately, she is just as impatient a sitter as Amélie. Frankly, I think I overstayed my welcome with all the poses I forced on her.”

He walks over to another canvas and removes its cover, revealing another portrait of Judith. This one is formal. She stands in a dark interior next to a grand piano and wearing a different kimono: satin, tied with a bow at the neck. A beautiful clasp glistens in her hair. An ornate mirror is on a far wall. This painting is more faithful to her current age. Her face is fuller, her physique stouter.

“You haven't ruined the friendship or hers with Amélie. Otherwise, she would not be here now,” I point out.

“Amélie was hoping that Judith would leave before Samuel arrived. Had I known, I would not have mentioned to her that Samuel was on his way. Amélie was angry at me for that indiscretion. She's jealous of anyone who may compete for his attention. Had Pierre not shown up, I would have opted to go back to Paris except that you were already on your way here.” He laughs. “At least we would have been vagabonds together.”

“As much as I would have enjoyed that, your patroness won't be deserting you after all. By his own admission, Pozzi isn't staying. Madame Bernhardt expects him tomorrow.”

John laughs heartily as if I've told a great joke. “He said that to you?”

“No,” I admit. “To Monsieur Gautreau.”

John grimaces. “Well then, it's good that Monsieur Gautreau has been overseas. Otherwise, he would have heard that Madame Bernhardt is currently touring throughout Europe. Having made the monumental mistake of allowing her son to manage her theatre, she must now stave off bankruptcy.”

I stutter, “Pozzi lied?”

“He couldn't very well have admitted the truth to Pierre—that he was on his way to Les Chênes for a tryst with his wife.”

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I shudder. “I can’t wait for this night to end. The sooner Pozzi leaves, the better.”

John shakes his head. “He’ll stay on at Amélie’s behest.”

“But Pierre made it quite clear he prefers that Samuel not linger,” I protest.

John shrugs. “My wager is on Amélie. And if I’m right, I’ll head back to Paris with you.”

While my brother prepares for tomorrow’s sitting, I make my way to my room.

Its walls, papered in a yellow toile pattern, give one a sense of calm. Wide moldings line the polished floor and the high ceiling. The vanity table has an oval mirror and a marble top. A tall pitcher filled with water sits to one side of it.

The large window faces another garden: in the back of the chateau. A bridge has been built over the stream. Topped with a round Oriental dome, a gazebo is on the bank closest to the grounds.

My satchel has already been placed on the vanity table. My trunk is beneath a large window on a wide, low wooden bench near an armoire.

I open the trunk and lay my meager selection of dresses across the bed. I started this journey with no intention of staying. I certainly had not envisioned dressing for a dinner party.

I leap at the knock on my door. Imagine my surprise when I open it and see Amélie.

Then I remember why: she is retrieving the diamond clip.

Her usual preening smirk is replaced by tight-lipped determination. “May I enter?”

“Of course.” I step aside. “I assume you’re here for this.” I feel her eyes on me as I walk to my satchel. I pull out my kerchief and unwrap it.

Within a few steps, she’s at my side. Before I can hand it to her, she snatches it away.

As she passes the bed, she eyes my dresses. “A shame. Except for your affliction, we would be the same size. I could have lent you one of my frocks.”

To carry off the charade that this is a missed opportunity to show me kindness, she murmurs, “*Merci*,” while she walks to the door.

As badly as I want to shout out where I found the damned thing, I hold my tongue. Her portrait is more than a commission for John. To his mind, it will prove he’s a great artist.

He’s right. If holding my tongue will help him prove it, so be it.

CHAPTER 22

After making my way downstairs, a servant shows me to a drawing room, where the others, John included, are already enjoying aperitifs.

Judith and Amélie have cornered Samuel. He tells a joke that has them giggling raucously. Pierre is pouring a glass of wine for Madame Avegno. He beckons me over.

When I reach his side, he pours a glass for me as well. “Is your room to your liking?”

“Very much, sir. Thank you.” I tip my glass at him before taking a sip.

As Madame Avegno regales him with a tale of Louise’s latest adventure in the garden, I glance around at the others. John sits on one of the settees within reach of her, sketch pad and pen in hand. His drink, a wine, is on the table beside him. Quickly, he has drawn Amélie, gossiping and giggling with Judith. In another sketch, he renders Madame Avegno. Gallantly, he tears it from the sketchbook and hands it to her. She flushes with pride.

I glance at the drawing on the page that was under Madame Avegno’s: a profile of Albert Belleruche. His eyelids are partially closed, and his head is slightly tilted so that his chin is raised.

John shields the sketchbook. I assume he fears that, like me, one of the others may recognize the likeness.

Will they view it as one of his many mindless sketches of acquaintances? Or will the seductive pose give away Albert’s true role in John’s life? Now that he shares John’s studio, his path may have crossed with Amélie’s. Perhaps Pozzi’s as well...

I pray not. Any whiff of seduction is catnip to the doctor.

While the conversation flows around us, John stares down at the sketch, and then over at Amélie. He flips another page in the pad. There are a few more sketches of Albert: different, but the angle is similar.

Suddenly, John is altering the first sketch: the ear is made smaller; the nose, shorter but sharper as well. The neck is thinned. Within a moment’s time, it isn’t Albert at all, but Amélie in a more detailed likeness. He sketches her, possibly from memory. In it, she sits at a dinner table. A tulle stole reveals her bare arms and plunging décolleté. Her left arm is bent so that it rests in

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front of her as she leans forward toward the table's floral centerpiece to proffer a champagne toast to someone beyond the canvas' purview.

Is it Pierre? Or was it Pozzi from the last time he was here?

At that moment, Madame Avegno glances at John. Clapping her hands gleefully, she exclaims. "*Cherie*, you have so perfectly captured my Amélie at her most joyous!"

Standing over John's shoulder, Samuel stares down at my brother's handiwork. "He has indeed," he murmurs.

Turning to Madame Avegno, John vows, "I'll paint it properly as a gift to you, madame."

She thanks him profusely.

Pozzi says nothing. But by his gaze, the sketch has him in its thrall.

To retain his princess's adoration, John must curry favor even after he puts down his palette. In the evenings, he readily shifts roles: from that of prince to court jester.

If I were to point this out, would he consider it an insult? I doubt it.

While in the company of Amélie and Madame Avegno, the allusion is no joke.

When we are called in to dinner, John finally puts his pad away.

The broad dining table can easily seat twenty: eighteen on each side of the long Second Empire piece, and a large armchair at each end. Considering this is a more intimate group, one would think that such a small party would congregate at only one side of the table. Instead, the husband takes one end, and the wife takes the other. Amélie has seated Judith on Pierre's right and me on his left. The same configuration puts John on her left and Pozzi on her right. Madame Avegno sits on John's other side.

Amélie makes no attempt to include her husband and those of us next to him in her conversations. But because Pierre is a gracious host, throughout the meal Judith and I are drawn into discussions about new plays, favorite operas, and novels we wish to read next.

He does not seem to miss conversing with his wife or mother-in-law.

From the glances we are getting from Pozzi and John, I assume they wish they also had our company.

Pierre would have found John acceptable company. For Pozzi, he has only cold stares.

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After dinner, we retire to the parlor. An ebony grand piano faces out into the room, allowing the player to enjoy the reactions of the audience.

“Monsieur Sargent, will you honor us with a piano recital?” Madame Avegno asks.

“Of course,” John assures her. “Emily, perhaps you will join me?”

Shyly, I follow him to the piano and sit beside him.

“*Lohengrin Prelude*,” he mutters.

Ah, this is his laurel branch to Judith.

Not that I mind. It’s the perfect blend of fantasy, passion, and tension, aptly reflecting the mood of our audience.

John and I learned the piece before my fifteenth birthday. My brother knows it to be one of my favorites, which is why he takes the *secondo* position, and I the *primo*, albeit we are proficient in either.

In fact, I know it well enough to glance around the room as I play its gentler passages.

Although it must be past her bedtime, I see that Louise and her nanny have joined us. What child can resist a dance meant for fairies? The young girl sits in her grandmother’s lap. Both lean forward intently, as if envisioning the winged pixies who flutter amongst its cascade of notes.

Judith’s eyes are closed. Her head sways gently as the music sweeps over her. Despite John’s vexing obsession for painting his friend, their shared love of music—and specifically, that of Judith’s now-deceased lover—withstands such petty annoyances, as it should.

Judith sits at the end of a long sofa that can easily accommodate several people. Amélie has chosen to sit at her side. If Amélie had hoped that her lover would take the seat beside her, she must be disappointed that he has instead chosen to stand behind the two women.

At least, I think that until I see he has placed a finger on the nape of her neck. It climbs to the end of her chignon, encircling the curl that refuses to be tucked away.

Now that we have reached the piece’s gentle climax, I realize that Pierre stands behind us, where he too can appreciate the audience’s reaction to our music.

He can also see Pozzi’s show of adoration.

Upon hitting the final note, I turn to see Pierre’s face.

His eyes are glazed with tears.

Realizing the others are clapping, he does the same.

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John and I stand and thank our audience with bows. I then rise so that John can take charge of the instrument.

He enjoys singing for his supper. I do not.

When it comes to his musical choices, my brother is nothing but capricious. He begins with a *bergerette* by Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin: not surprisingly, *Oh Let Us Sing of the Love of John*.

Louise squeals with delight.

His next offerings—one ditty after another—are no longer his audience’s focus. Instead, conversation takes its place. What starts out as Amélie and Judith chiding each other over missed shots in their tennis game against John soon becomes requests for Paris gossip from Samuel, who is happy to oblige.

Pierre picks up a book, but no pages are turned. He is listening to their chatter. In time, Madame Avegno engages Judith in describing the plot of her novel in progress, which she calls *La Reine de Bangalore*. Samuel takes this opportunity to sit beside Amélie. They talk in low tones.

Instead of conversing, I meander to the Gautreau’s bookcase. For the most part the shelves are spare of tomes. Mostly, they are filled with knickknacks: as expected, *Japonais* in style. I come across a book that looks interesting. Entitled *En Ménage*, its author is Joris-Karl Huysmans.

A page has been folded back. On it, the reader has discovered along with the protagonist that his wife has been unfaithful to him.

I wonder if it was Amélie or Pierre who marked the passage.

What would Huysmans think of the marriage in this household? Whom would he see as its hero—or heroine, and who would be its villain?

I still have the book in my hand when Amélie exclaims, “How nice! Samuel has informed me that Madame Bernhardt has extended an invitation for me to join her at Belle-Île for a few days.”

Instantly, the room goes silent. Apparently, everyone knows the statement is a farce.

Pierre stares blankly, but he doesn’t say a word.

To break the uneasy calm, Madame Avegno snaps her fingers at Louise’s nanny, indicating that it is the child’s bedtime.

John was right. Amélie has found a way to keep her assignation with Samuel.

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With the child's departure, Madame Avegno joins Judith and Amélie—and now Samuel too—on the larger sofa.

Eventually, Pierre walks out.

Suddenly, I find the room stifling. Quietly, I take my leave.

CHAPTER 23

Although there is no moon tonight, because the whole house is lit up, there is enough light to make my way down one of the gravel paths to the back garden.

A light flickers ahead. A firefly, perhaps?

I see a dark figure rising from one of the garden's benches. "Who is it?"

The voice is Pierre's. The light is his cigar.

I stop short. "I thought I would take in some air."

"Come then." He beckons me by waving the cigar.

He waits until I lower myself onto the bench before doing so himself.

We sit in silence. A warm breeze rustles the trees. Countless stars glisten in the inky sky.

When a shooting star flashes past, I jolt up.

Pierre curses as his cigar's ash falls on his vest.

Realizing I've startled him, I whisper, "I'm sorry."

"Why? Because everyone knows—and lies about it?" He drops his cigar to the ground and grinds his heel into it.

"You know too, then?" I ask.

"That she's lying about the invitation from Bernhardt?" With nothing more than starlight, it's too dark to see Pierre's face, but I hear the derision in his chuckle. "Yes, I know. My wife may be surprised to learn I read more than the financial newspapers. The gossip in *Le Figaro* can be just as enlightening."

"Then why would you let her keep up her ploy?"

"Because it's useless to do otherwise. Amélie is determined to maintain the affair—as long as Pozzi will have her."

"Isn't he just as passionate about her?" I ask.

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“Doctor Pozzi is renowned for the passion he shows all of his patients. Amélie is not the exception but the rule.”

“If that’s the case, you must save her from herself,” I insist.

I can make out Pierre’s silhouette as he shakes his head. “I’ve already told you I know it’s impossible.”

“Most young women are foolish when it comes to matters of the heart,” I counter. “Why should you allow it to ruin the rest of her life?”

“It is not my doing but hers,” he reminds me. “If it were a moment of madness... If she had qualities that allowed her to see and feel beyond her impulsive need for gratification... If she were...were more like you....”

Like me.

He doesn’t know me at all.

And yet he knows me so well.

To spurn this man’s love, what a callous, childish fool Amélie is! “But to not even try...for your marriage, for your daughter....”

Even in darkness, I feel Pierre shrink beside me. I feel him shaking.

He does not deserve such heartbreak.

Instinctively, I lay my hand over his heart.

Yes, it is pounding.

In time, he lays his hand over mine.

As shocked as I am, I don’t move it. I like that he has done so.

Finally, he says, “Thank you for your clarity.”

Eventually, he removes his hand and stands up. “Let me escort you back to the house.”

The following day, I rise early, dress, and make my way to breakfast.

Only Madame Avegno is at the table feeding her canary, which she keeps in a cage by the window. The bird chirps happily for its feast of day-old bread.

“Is the rest of the household still asleep?” I ask.

“Not at all,” she retorts. “Our guests have already left.”

“The doctor...and Judith as well?”

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Madame Avegno nods. “They caught the early morning ferry to St.-Énogat. From there, the doctor will go on to Belle-Île.”

“Did Amélie go with them?”

Shrugging, she mutters, “My daughter is ill.”

Poor John. Once again, Amélie will be indisposed.

Noting my disappointment, she adds, “Amélie has asked that Monsieur Sargent be prepared for her afternoon sitting. He prefers the light then, does he not?” She then excuses herself to check on Louise.

So, Pierre followed through in demanding that Amélie stay.

She would not have done so unless she wanted the marriage to succeed.

At least, I hope this is the case. Pierre is a dear, caring person. He deserves to be happy.

I’ve just finished breakfast when Pierre enters the dining room. He takes a plate from the buffet and heaps food upon it.

We talk of trifles: weather, Paris in the summer, journeys we have made. Other places we wish to see. When Pierre mentions that my painting of the Bernese Alps has piqued his interest in the area,

I’m overcome by sadness. “Now that my mission is complete, I’ll take my leave.”

“John wrote your parents yesterday that you are to extend your stay a fortnight.”

“But—”

“I insisted that he do so—just as I plead with you to appease me in the request. Your presence is... it is greatly appreciated.”

Surprised, I ask, “By whom?”

“By the whole household. Like Monsieur Sargent, you are a most accommodating guest—and among the most accomplished we have hosted at Les Chênes. It’s refreshing to have conversations on topics other than Paris gossip and entertainment that moves us beyond mundane card games.” He raises his eyes skyward. “When you aren’t assisting your brother, you may use your free time to paint. We have no snow-capped mountains, but there is still a peaceful beauty to Brittany and Les Chênes in particular.”

“I would enjoy that very much.” To be free of my family’s beck and call to focus on my painting is a dream come true.

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And yet...

“And Amélie?” I ask. “She won’t mind having me underfoot?”

Pierre snorts. “You’re far less intrusive than anyone she’s invited here.” He hesitates, then adds: “Amélie passed on the opportunity to go to Belle-Île.”

“Yes, Madame Avegno told me,” I reply. “I’m glad, but I’m not surprised. She must have realized how much she had to lose.”

“Yes,” Pierre concedes. “She did not want to risk the thing that means the most to her.”

“Your love,” I say.

“Not at all,” he responds crisply.

Of course not. Despite her foolishness, Pierre’s love is steadfast.

“Then...Louise?” Would he really have been so cruel as to threaten to take her child from her?

As if reading my mind, he shakes his head. “That was never the issue, for Amélie or for me.”

“It is for every mother,” I protest.

“Not one as vain as my wife.”

Exasperated, I exclaim, “What could mean more than a child to a mother?”

“It depends on the mother. In her case, Amélie knows I’m no ogre. It allows her to place even more importance on her social standing. Instead, I threatened her with the one thing she feels will cast it in stone: Monsieur Sargent’s painting.”

He watches my face as the implication of his words registers to me:

Amélie’s vanity got in the way.

CHAPTER 24

Every fairy tale has a princess.

By now—my fifth day at Les Chênes—I am fooled into thinking it is my role in this euphoric world.

To catch the morning light, I rise by seven o'clock. Madame Boucher has told me the mistress of the house is never seen downstairs before noon. Even if she rises early, she takes her breakfast in bed before beginning the arduous and covetously guarded ritual of her toilette.

Pierre is already in the dining room nursing a second mug of the thick, dark coffee brewed from a specific bean he discovered while on a Brazilian expedition. He seems genuinely delighted to share my company and is forthcoming with news of world events, which he follows most keenly via the numerous newspapers delivered each morning. Still, I do my best to ask only pertinent questions and keep them to a minimum. I'm surprised by the depth of his answers, and he never fails to ask my opinion. I'm not used to conversing on such topics. And yet, I happily welcome it, for it makes me see the world as a much bigger place.

Discourses such as these aren't the purview of my parents, and they are certainly of no interest to John. Father's reticence toward strangers limits his conversation to letters received from family or concerns about his health, or Mother's, or Violet's, even if there is no reason for this to be the case. And whereas John and Mother can talk endlessly about art, music, and theater, their faces go blank when topics of politics, economics, or world events are put to them.

For us Sargents, any talk of money is always painful, which is why it's only broached when it can no longer be avoided. While here, I don't need to worry about playing nursemaid to my parents or sister or counting pennies for every purchase and meal.

Sadly, I can't think of any subject that might be shared between the Gautreaus other than their daughter. I've always imagined that marriage grows from mutual passion—indeed that of the

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flesh, but also of the mind. No one expects spouses to talk about all things. But can a marriage survive a dearth of conversation? If spouses have nothing to say to each other, why share their lives?

Even spinsterhood is more desirable than a mute, loveless marriage.

I spend my mornings walking Les Chênes' spacious grounds, seeking out the choicest spots to bring to life in my canvases. Some walks are shared with John, who is just as eager as me to discover an interesting setting for a landscape painting.

Under his tutelage, I finesse my oil painting technique. In return, I help him in his preparation for Amélie's sittings. But because I know John strives to develop genuine friendships with his subjects—one built on trust, candor, and the sort of intimacy that only comes by observing every gesture, glance, and emotion—I take my leave when Amélie makes her entrance.

I'm sure she appreciates this. Not that I care. I do it for John.

For the rest of the afternoon, I'm free to paint.

Amélie's dinners and the evening gatherings are important to her and are of great consequence to those who are escaping Paris' torrid heat wave. I sit quietly through the former but excuse myself for the latter. Although this disappoints John, I know I won't be missed by Amélie or her guests.

And doing so makes it easier for me to assume the role of the princess in this fairy tale.

But stories also have an element of evil: a sadistic ogre, perhaps, or a jealous witch. There is also a handsome prince who rides up to save the day. It would be sad if Amélie were considered the princess in this tale. To her mind, Pierre is the ogre. Despite providing her everything to be admired by her legion of acolytes—a beautiful home, fine gowns, an enviable place in society—Amélie mourns her time away from the one she considers her prince: Pozzi, who has been banished from this fantastical kingdom.

She doesn't understand that Pierre is the frog who longs to be freed from the curse that clouds her vision of his role in her life: her one true prince and protector.

This morning I'm painting beside the stream.

Far behind the chateau is a bend where a configuration of rocks forces the water to cascade before flowing into a necklace of tide pools. Following John's advice that the imperative is to put

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paint to canvas quickly and without judgment, I do exactly that. For the stream, my brush washes the center in blues and greens. The tide pools are swirls of cerulean and chartreuse. Splotches of gray shadowed in black represent the rocks. Tree trunks are created by thrusting vertical slashes of brown, tan, white, and black on either side of the canvas. Shorter horizontal lines, interspersed with arches in these same hues, make up the branches on which I dab varying shades of red, brown, and yellow to represent the forest's canopy of leaves. The reeds that line the stream are created from green wispy vertical slashes.

I stand back to scrutinize it. The scene is true to the location, and yet it feels empty. There is nothing to focus the viewer's eye.

At that moment, I hear voices. Pierre and Louise are running along the stream's bank, following a miniature boat—no more than a yard wide, with an open sail almost as tall—as it bobs its way downstream toward me. Pierre wears a straw boater over white linen pants and a jacket. Louise wears a white pinafore over her gingham frock. The ribbons of her wide-brimmed hat stream behind her.

Each wields a long stick which they use to guide the boat. But for now, doing so is impossible because it moves too quickly in the swift current.

The boat is only a few feet in front of me when its keel gets wedged between two rocks. Father and daughter can't see this because of the dip in the stream.

I cry out, "Over here!"

Seeing me, Pierre's face breaks into a big smile.

Louise ducks shyly behind her father.

I point to the boat. "It is caught between the rocks."

Taking Louise's hand, Pierre walks her nearer to me. When she realizes the boat's dilemma, she cries in frustration.

Pierre crouches and says something to calm her. She nods slowly and hands him her stick.

Walking over, I ask, "May I help?"

"Will you watch Louise while I ford the stream?"

I nod.

He sits at the water's edge. After taking off his boots and socks, he rolls up the legs of his pants, then hefts himself off the ground with the sticks.

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Louise moves closer to the bank, but I take her hand in case she decides to follow him into the brisk, cold water. Together, we watch as he steps gingerly through the teeming current. Pierre uses the sticks to guide himself beyond the sharp rocks and slippery pebbles. As he reaches the boat, one of the poles goes deep into the water. Pierre stumbles, falling to his knees.

Alarmed, Louise cries out. I must hold her back to keep her from going in to save him.

Finally, Pierre finds his footing. With the other pole, he reaches for the boat and dislodges it, only to have the swift current wrest it away. It floats farther downstream.

The water is up to his knees, and he can't move fast enough to catch it.

Yet again, the boat is on something: a branch on our side of the stream.

"Louise, promise you'll wait here for your papa," I command.

She nods solemnly. Her concern for him is greater than her love for the boat.

I run as fast as possible so that I may get to the boat before the current loosens. To grab it, I drop to my knees. But I must still reach out beyond the bank. I stretch as far as I can and grasp it—

Only to fall into the stream. The water is deeper than I suspected. Having been unprepared for the fall, I sputter as I gulp water.

I hear a splash. Then, I feel an arm around my waist. Pierre is lifting me out of the stream. He shoves me onto the bank, then crawls onto it himself.

Together, we lay there on the grass, shivering and coughing.

I still have the boat in my hand.

Louise runs over to us. She is laughing and crying at the same time.

"Other than we are wet, all is fine, little one. You see?" Pierre insists.

She flings her arms around her father's neck and kisses him.

I reach out to her with the boat. She stares at me. Then, ducking her head, she whispers, "*Merci! Merci, mademoiselle.*"

Before I respond, she snatches the boat out of my hands and runs off.

I stare after her, then laugh.

Pierre is chuckling too. Suddenly he stops. He stares at me.

I now realize that I'd shed my shawl sometime during the rescue. Without it, my white blouse and camisole, now soaked, are sheer and cling to my skin. There is nothing to shield the outline of my breasts from Pierre's eyes.

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Ashamed, I turn away. But then I remember my hump is exposed as well. I straighten my back. I don't know why. It's a useless effort.

Quickly, he takes off his jacket and places it over my shoulders. For a mere moment, his hand rests on my disfigurement.

When our eyes meet, I'm surprised that I see no pity. Nor, unlike Pozzi, do they project dispassionate analysis.

Instead, I see acceptance.

When I smile, he does too.

All time stops at that moment. The sun warms us, the birds trill in the boughs above us, and the stream gurgles over the rocks that tormented us. It now seems like so long ago.

In time, Pierre says, "Thank you for your kindness to Louise."

He stands up. I take his outstretched hand. But when he beckons toward the house. I point to my easel. "I must keep painting."

Pierre frowns. "But...you must first get out of those wet clothes."

I shake my head. "The sun is hot. I'll be warm in no time, and my clothes will be dry soon."

"I'll tell Madame Boucher to draw a warm bath for you as soon as you're in sight," he insists. He then reaches toward his head, only to realize that he no longer has a hat to tip in my direction. Sheepishly, he adds, "I look forward to seeing you at dinner."

As he strides away, I turn back to my painting. Nothing has changed. I am still stymied as to its emptiness...

But then I realize what it needs.

I scrape the still damp paint from two areas in the center of the canvas. Afterward, I pick up my palette again. Dipping my brush into paint, I work on the missing objects: a man, his pants rolled up just below his knees, stands in the stream. He holds up a toy boat to a young girl. She smiles gleefully. Are her outstretched arms welcoming the boat or its savior? In the painting, his hat is once again safely on his head.

In time, the sun disappears into the trees. It has taken me all afternoon to get the details just right. I stand back so that I may analyze it objectively.

A thrill runs through me: it is the best painting I've ever done.

John hopes to finish Amélie's portrait before she returns to Paris in October. If I'm allowed to stay on, I must finish mine before then too.

CHAPTER 25

Tonight, you must come out of your room and play with us.” John insists.

“Thank you, but no,” I respond. “I’d appreciate a quiet evening.”

I’m helping John move a table so that it is positioned in a place that he insists provides the optimum lighting for Amélie’s sitting. As it is, John has been informed that today he will only be granted an hour with her. The Gautreaus expect guests who are staying overnight; such events always take her away from the project.

“I can’t let Amélie divert our precious time for practice of a four-handed duet,” he mutters.

On most evenings after dinner, the Gautreaus host gatherings for other refugees from Paris’ heat. Ever the solicitous husband, Pierre is a constant fixture at her side. On other nights, their acquaintances reciprocate with invitations to their country estates.

At all times, John and Madame Avegno accompany them.

“Amélie should be counting her blessings that you work just as hard at entertaining her and her clique as you do at her portrait,” I grumble.

“You’ve been invited to attend these soirees too,” John points out.

“I’m fine alone. There is much to keep me busy.” Though Pierre has seen that their friends’ invitations are extended to me, I decline. These precious few weeks, every moment I have is devoted to painting.

“Your art is fine, Emily—at least, what I’ve been allowed to see.” John is jibing me. Whereas I’ve shown him a few of my works in progress—a garden depiction, a landscape that encompasses the estate’s forest, my attempt at capturing a croquet game between Amélie and a few of her friends—I keep the painting of Pierre and Louise shrouded. I wish to wait until it’s complete before showing it to John.

It has been almost a fortnight since the incident at the stream. My interactions with Pierre have been polite but distant. To the most part, he and I have kept to our schedules, which allow

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for quick exchanges at the breakfast table: innocuous conversations that revolve around world events and politics, a topic of which Pierre is most keen, to the point that he is running for some local office, which takes up much of his mornings.

In the afternoons, no matter where I set up my easel, Pierre never fails to run across me. He is complimentary on my attempts to capture the beauty of Les Chênes. I insist that I can never do it justice.

Knowing that our paths may cross, I've kept the stream painting in my room under its cloak. I won't show it to him until it is finished. If he finds it pleasing, I shall offer it to him as my token of thanks for having me as his guest. But I will include the caveat that should I gain an interview at an atelier, I'll be allowed to show it as a sample of my technique.

I doubt he'd object. And yet, since the incident at the stream, his reticence to say anything beyond a few stilted sentences concerns me. Perhaps he feels he has overstepped some invisible boundary around the edges of our friendship?

Worse yet, perhaps he feels I have done so.

I look forward to the opportunity to ask him. If so, I hope he feels there is a way I can make amends.

"I know you'll want to attend tonight's gathering," John insists. "Do you remember Emma-Marie Allouard-Jouan, whom I painted last year?"

"The novelist from Paris—the one who is also a translator? Yes, of course. Very gracious."

"She is also a friend of the Gautreaus. In fact, she's a favorite of Pierre's. Tonight, she arrives here with guests," John explains. "They'll spend the night at Les Chênes. Tomorrow, they continue to her country house, which is in Dinard—near Judith's cottage. A fortnight ago I was writing Emma-Marie, scolding her for staying in the city while I was here. Amélie walked in. When she heard what I was doing, she asked if she could add her own postscript, but insisted that she mail it herself. That way, she said, I would not be tempted to read it." He grins. "I anticipate it has something to do with the portrait. Tonight, I shall corner Emma-Marie to confirm this. Hopefully, Amélie expressed her joy with it."

"You have quite an agenda," I reply.

"Then you'll stay with us after dinner?"

"Yes, if you feel it will help in any way." I shrug. "Although I don't see how."

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“I just need a few moments alone with Emma-Marie. If need be, create a diversion to make it possible.”

I sigh. “If you insist.”

John knows I hate being the center of attention, even for a few moments. But he also knows I’ll do anything for him.

Les Chênes holds many secrets. Late in the afternoon, I discover one of them.

I’m studying the horizon from my room when I notice a meandering break in the forest’s dense canopy.

I feel it’s worth investigating.

I slip out of the house and walk to the area where I’ve deduced the path begins, but at first, it’s not easy to see. A fallen bough obscures it. Still, all one must do is look beyond it to detect the route in which the forest’s carpet of pine needles has been thinned from the tread of deer hooves, or perhaps human footsteps.

A quarter-hour later I find myself in front of a tiny stone house.

The door creaks open. Despite its decrepit state, its solitary room is clean enough: no cobwebs, and there is an iron bed as well as a table with two chairs. A row of shelves holds children’s books, a chess set, a checkers game, and a globe. A map of the world is pinned to one of the rough-hewn walls. There are even logs on the hearth.

A wooden box is on the table. The carving on its cover depicts a trio of fairies.

I’m tempted to open it, but then I hear footsteps. Perhaps I am trespassing on a groundskeeper’s abode?

I cannot tell who is more surprised at the intrusion: me or Pierre.

He is startled enough to leap back. When he realizes I’m not a figment of his imagination, his lips rise into an uncertain smile. “Mademoiselle Sargent. ... You have found the one place remembered only by Les Chênes’ oldest servants—*le chalet du chasseur*.”

“The huntsman’s cottage?”

He nods. “Although, as you can see, it no longer serves that purpose. I’m preparing it for the day in which Louise is inquisitive enough to find it and make it her own secret hideaway, as it was for my brother and me.”

“Does she even know it exists?”

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Pierre chuckles. “Every day, I leave a clue in the form of a puzzle. With them, she is creating a map. Sometimes the clue is a poem. Other times, it’s a riddle or a quote. The final clues are its coordinates. As soon as she guesses them, her governess, Mademoiselle Pauline, will accompany her on the discovery to this special little place.” He sighs. “I should love to be here to greet her. I hope it takes place before I’m to leave again for overseas—at the end of next month.” He holds up a key. “The first clue was the twin of this. The last clue is enclosed in that box on the table.”

“You’ll get your wish. She’s smart and inquisitive.” I walk to the table. “What is in the box?”

“Open it and see.”

I lift the lid. Music fills the room. It is the opening stanzas to the piano piece that John and I played together the other night, when Pozzi was here: Wagner’s *Lohengrin Prelude*.

Noting my surprise, Pierre smiles. “After hearing you and your brother play the piece, I had it specially made. Louise will be delighted if the cottage is filled with fairies. She believes that they chase away the witches.”

“And what does Amélie think of the game?” I ask.

Pierre’s face hardens. “My wife considers the whole venture a folly. She insists that such knowledge is of no consequence to girls. But I refuse to let our daughter play only with dolls, or to grow up knowing no more geography than the streets of Paris—and only those where the best dressmakers are located.”

He knows Amélie all too well.

“Speaking of Louise, I hope I did not traumatize her with my fall into the stream.”

“Not at all. Like me, she was worried that you...that you may have been hurt.”

“Perhaps it was silly of me to attempt the rescue.” Hesitantly, I add, “Especially if, in any way, it embarrassed you.” I look away. “I would never want anything to hinder our friendship.”

Pierre doesn’t answer.

The longer he sustains his silence, the more I realize I’ve put him in an awkward position. Our acquaintance is no more than a by-product of the strong-willed determination of the two people we love more than anyone else.

To assume anything greater is sheer folly.

Even knowing this—even realizing that once the portrait is completed we will go our separate ways, perhaps never to meet again—I still wish to liken our relationship to something ephemeral and fleeting, like Longfellow’s two ships passing in the night.

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Such folderol. For Pierre, it's nothing more than a temporary inconvenience.

I force myself to look at him. Imagine my surprise at what I see: clear-eyed compassion.

And should I have any further doubt, he exclaims, "I'll wager that the best thing to come from the painting is our dear and beautiful friendship."

Hearing that his thoughts echo mine, I've never felt so happy.

Pierre holds out his hand. "Come. Madame Boucher has just informed me that tonight we are hosting an old friend, Emma-Marie Allouard-Jouan, and her companions. They will be here any moment. We should be there to greet them."

As we walk back through the woods, I express my own joy with once again seeing Emma-Marie.

Pierre's eyes light up. "Ah, I had not realized that she is your friend as well! How did you meet her?"

"John painted her portrait last year," I reply. "She was referred to him by another patron." I am trying to remember who it was, but it doesn't come to me.

At least, not until we see Emma-Marie alight from her carriage with her guests:

Thérèse and Samuel Pozzi.

Seeing them, Pierre freezes. There is no change in his demeanor, but his face loses its ruddiness.

He sags so low that his arm now feels heavy on mine.

I can think of no better time for a man to need a friend at his side than when he must welcome into his home the scoundrel that he knows to be his wife's lover, yet he pretends otherwise.

CHAPTER 26

I could easily be fooled that I'm watching a *commedia dell'arte* as an audience of one.

The leading players are all such good actors that I genuinely believe Emma-Marie is oblivious to the tragedy she has inflicted on her host.

Pierre knows his role well: that of the piece's *Pantalone*—the merchant often duped by the comely young wife.

His warm salutations to all who alight from the carriage are offered with kisses on the back of the hands of Thérèse and Emma-Marie. Their roles in this performance are no more than a couple of its stock characters. Despite her youth, Thérèse embodies the part of sour *La Ruffiana*, whereas her hostess is the much more gracious and accommodating *La Signora*.

As for the villain—Pozzi—a hearty handshake is proffered. It is accepted as a challenge. The gruffly muttered exchange between the two men attests to this.

John's breathless appearance and stammered inanities immediately earn him the role of the piece's *Zanni*. Did this flustered Harlequin know Pozzi would make another appearance in just over a fortnight? I hope not, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn Amélie divulged this to him. In any regard, he'll do his best to lighten the plot.

I fear he cannot upstage the defining climax to his satisfaction. Only when the curtain falls will he recognize his actual role in it and why he was helpless to change its conclusion.

Finally, the play's *Innamorata* makes her appearance. All eyes move to Amélie as she floats gracefully down Les Chênes' circular steps. Her arms are flung out so that she may embrace her guests: the women first, to whom her murmurs are so gratefully received that this audience can only wonder what intimate detail or shared memory brings joy to their hearts. Were they aware of the pain their appearance brings their host, they'd be horrified.

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As for the villain, the heroine does not shirk away from him, aghast. Instead, she takes both his hands in hers and draws Pozzi in for a gentle kiss on the cheek. One could easily conclude that instead, he's the play's *Innamorato*.

This would be the greatest tragedy of all.

It dawns on me that the blissful days between this and Pozzi's previous appearance were just a pleasant entr'acte to the devious action to come.

During the evening meal, everyone stays in character.

In Thérèse's case, questions meant to bring a gleam to her eye—the precocity of her year-old infant, Catherine, the joys of her newborn, Jean; the health of her mother; and, of course, gossip from Paris—are given short shrift.

In due time, she claims a headache.

“After dinner, I'll give you a draught that will put you at ease,” Pozzi promises.

Thérèse's stilted responses give her hostess a reason to seek Emma-Marie's opinion on Paris in summer. Thankfully, Emma-Marie's light, lively repartee buries the memory of Thérèse's taciturn responses. By complementing all she has seen of Les Chênes, she endears herself even more to her hosts.

I'm heartened that Pierre doesn't embrace his role of the cuckolded husband but instead takes on that of the play's director. In that regard, he allows John to entertain the women while he corrals Pozzi for a discussion about the scientific discovery known as the microbe. From the way Pozzi leaps at the opportunity to talk of it, it's evident that medical topics capture his heart like none other.

At least when he's away from the boudoir.

With dinner completed and Louise tucked in her bed, host, hostess, and guests move to the drawing room. Glasses of port are offered. Only Thérèse declines. Instead, she sips from a water goblet.

“Emily, would you care to play the piano for us?” John asks.

With that cue, I'm now drawn onto the stage of this melodrama.

I choose to play Liszt's *Liebesträum No. 3*, which allows me to caress the keyboard as I lose myself in its flights of fanciful notes.

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I pray that Pierre also finds solace in it.

As I play, I glance around the room, taking note of where the cast members of our little drama are positioned. At the piano, I am downstage. Pierre stands at the farthest point upstage, next to the drawing room's double entry doors.

John sits stage left on the sofa between Thérèse and Emma-Marie. He is already perched to lean into our dear friend during one of the piece's quieter passages. I'm sure he'll broach the question he yearns to have answered: When Amélie wrote her, did she mention what she thought of John's portrait?

Pozzi and Amélie have taken the two armchairs positioned stage right. A side table is between them. They aren't touching, and they seem absorbed in the music.

The piece is short: not even five minutes. A trill brings it to a close.

When it's over, Thérèse excuses herself. "The journey was exhausting," she explains.

Ever the solicitous husband, Pozzi also stands, says good night, then accompanies her out of the room.

Amélie's reaction is a mere shrug. Perhaps even they don't dare attempt a rendezvous under such circumstances.

John motions me to continue. He is enjoying his respite from the keyboard.

My next piece is Schubert's *Impromptu, Opus Ninety, Number Four*. The seven-minute piece begins with lightness and heart but then moves into deep passionate darkness before ending as one envisions a beautiful sunrise: glistening with the promise of redemption.

By the time I finish the piece, John is beaming, but Pierre has tears in his eyes.

Something disconcerting has happened, but I know not what.

Afterward, Amélie insists that she and John play a four-handed duet. It's a simple one: Mozart's *Der Vogelfänger bin Ich Ja*. He allows her to take the lower hands and does not wince when her timing is off or if she hits a wrong note.

Her mother claps proudly.

Pierre joins Emma-Marie in exclaiming, "*Bravissimo! Bravissimo!*"

The gathering disperses within half an hour. "Doctor Pozzi wishes to leave immediately after breakfast," Emma-Marie explains.

I glance at Pierre. He should welcome this news.

Instead, his face is set in stony resolve.

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I'd think Amélie would find this news disappointing. Instead, her smug smile stays firmly in place.

I feel I have missed a scene in our melodrama.

No matter. Thankfully, the curtain has fallen.

By the time I rise and make my way to breakfast, only John is awake.

“Emma-Marie and the Pozzis are gone,” he divulges.

“And Pierre?” I ask.

John shrugs. “From what I understand, he rose even earlier than his guests. Perhaps he’s in his study.” Thoughtfully and thoroughly, he butters a piece of toast.

I take the chair beside him. “Did Emma-Marie tell you what was in Amélie’s letter?”

He attempts a pout. “Yes.”

“Don’t leave me in suspense.”

John sighs, then rolls his eyes. “Her exact words were, ‘Mr. Sargent *a fait un chef d’oeuvre du portrait, je tiens à vous l’écrire car je suis sûre qu’il ne vous le dira pas.*’”

I take a moment to savor each word, as I’m sure John has been doing all night:

Mr. Sargent made a portrait masterpiece. I want to write it to you because I’m sure he won’t tell you...

“You must be ecstatic!” I exclaim.

“I should be, yes. And yet, there is still so much to be done to it.” This time, John’s frown is real. “I can’t take any brushstroke for granted.”

“Johnny, I truly believe you have nothing to fear. Even those who abhor Amélie’s desperate quest for the *beau monde*’s acceptance will concede that the painting transcends her personality faults and desperate foibles. They’ll see it for the masterpiece it is.”

“You’re wrong. As always, Amélie is my greatest fear. Because of her, it may never be seen by the public or the Salon.”

“Why do you feel this way? Are you concerned that Amélie yet again grows bored with the project? I would hope that Emma-Marie’s reply lays this fear to rest. She is adamant that Amélie is the painting’s champion.”

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“Frankly, I fear Pierre will put an end to Amélie’s sittings—especially when he finds out that they are her excuse to rendezvous with Samuel.”

“You’re too late for that. He’s neither blind nor stupid.”

John groans. “Once again, she’s gone too far! To cuckold him here, in his own home—”

“But... How? What happened?”

“I don’t know, exactly. However, Pierre asked me to draw up a bill for the painting. When I explained that it is usually presented upon the portrait’s completion, he insisted that I do so in any regard and that the price reflect my time, despite its finality. From that, I can deduce that the painting will never see the light of day.”

“How did you respond?”

“I told him I’d give my answer by the end of the day.” He tosses the toast onto his plate. His eggs and ham have not been touched either.

John has never lost his appetite.

Though he needs the money, the painting means even more to him.

CHAPTER 27

With my portable easel and chair strapped to my back and my tin box of paints in hand, I make my way through Les Chênes' forest to the huntsman's cottage. At this time of day, the sun's rays, filtered through the tall pines, magnify the beautiful detail of its stone walls.

I arrange my easel at an angle to the structure, far enough that the painting's composition includes the copse of young birches beyond the clearing and a good bit of the path leading to it.

But then, in the corner of my eye, I detect a shadow behind the clouded glass of the cottage's windows. A tug on the curtain moves it ever so slightly.

Someone is inside.

Despite Pierre's assumption that no one on the estate knows the abode, I'm curious enough to verify this.

Slowly, I lay down my palette and brush. As silently as possible, I walk to the door. I hesitate before knocking. What if the inhabitant is a poacher? Will he do me harm? After all, no one knows I'm here—

The door opens.

Pierre stands before me. Surprised, I take a step back. I'd assumed he was where he is on most mornings: campaigning in the village of St. Malo for the political position he yearns to hold.

His eyes avoid me. I barely hear his hoarse whisper: "You must leave now."

I glance over his shoulder. Paper and ink are on the table. The noise I made as I set up my easel must have interrupted his writing.

I then notice that his jacket is off.

He holds a gun in one hand.

I feel the muscles in my face move in tandem with the emotions playing out in my mind: my surprised smile opens into a gape of shock before my lips purse in comprehension of his pain—

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Finally, tears of concern spring to my eyes.

As I push past him, I reach for his empty hand. He hesitates, but then he takes hold of mine.

He also allows me to take the gun from his other hand.

His eyes seek an answer to my actions. He stiffens, bracing himself for one that admits fear or confusion.

Or, worse yet, pity.

I can think of no better time or place or circumstance to express what I know is in my heart:

“Dear, dear Pierre. I can’t imagine a world where you’re not in my life.”

I’m surprised at how easy it is to say aloud.

Knowing that I’ve freed myself of any doubt that my role in his life—and his in mine—transcends that of a cordial acquaintance or kind friend, I can now openly and wholeheartedly acknowledge the depth of the love I feel for him—the *pain* I feel for him—

The joy I feel when I am with him.

Pierre feels this way too. I see it in his eyes, which are now devoid of anger or shame.

Or doubt.

Our world has no room for the dark despair that guts him.

I must purge him of it.

Doing so means Pierre must rid himself of Amélie’s hold on him.

I start with a simple question: “What happened?”

“**Amélie was with Pozzi** last night.” Pierre hobbles to the bed like a beaten man and eases himself onto it.

I place the gun on the table. Then I make my way to him. Sitting beside Pierre, I ask, “How do you know this? Did she tell you herself?”

He scoffs, “Hardly.” Noting my bewilderment, he adds: “I found her coming out of Louise’s room in the middle of the night. Amélie claims she went to check on her.”

“Maybe she heard Louise cry out from a bad dream,” I reply.

Pierre’s voice is barely above a whisper. “Old houses such as these hold many secrets. One of Les Chênes’ is a hidden passageway in our daughter’s room. It leads to another suite.” Hesitantly, he adds: “If we’d had another child, connecting rooms would have made for great adventures. But... it was not to be.”

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My heart breaks for him. “Is it the suite where Samuel and Thérèse slept?”

“No. However, it leads to the room beside the one that Amélie assigned them.”

“You’ve then deduced Pozzi left Thérèse’s side to be with Amélie?”

Pierre nods. “The whole purpose of Pozzi’s visit was to rendezvous later with Amélie. Otherwise, he would have come down to sit in adoration of her after putting Thérèse to bed.”

“Even so, I imagine Thérèse sleeps with one eye open. She’s a very jealous woman.”

“Their tryst would have been easy enough if she were drugged into a deep sleep,” Pierre counters.

The thought makes me shiver. “That would be cruel of Pozzi!”

“It’s not beneath him,” Pierre insists. “And, as a doctor, sleeping draughts are at his disposal.”

“The draught’s purpose was to diminish Thérèse’s headache, no more,” I argue.

Pierre’s raucous laugh fills the room. “You must never underestimate a man who spends his life in a deep fog of lust. My suspicions were raised when Thérèse became drowsy so early in the evening. After everyone left the drawing room for the night, I took the water out of her goblet and gave it to Madame Avegno’s canary. It promptly fell asleep.” Disgusted, he throws up his hands. “I assume Pozzi then slipped out of their bedroom and into the empty suite for his assignation with my wife. Our daughter sleeps soundly. She would have never heard Amélie enter or leave.”

“But you would have heard her,” I point out. “Or...or felt her going.” My face warms at the thought of them in bed.

“Since Louise’s birth, we’ve maintained separate bedrooms.”

“Oh. ... I didn’t know....” I bite my tongue to stop my silly stammering.

“Everyone else does.” Anger deepens his voice into a growl. “Hadn’t you heard the rumor that Amélie refused me on our wedding night? That, in fact, while she held me at bay, she was Pozzi’s whore?”

“No, of course not!”

Pierre clicks his tongue. “You truly are an innocent, Mademoiselle Sargent. As the fable goes, only when Amélie found herself with child did she use the excuse of cramps for an abortion—unless you believe the gossips who say she claimed it was her unborn twin.” He shakes his head angrily. “The abortion was supposedly performed by Pozzi to cover his crime.”

“That is so...so cruel! So horrendous!”

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“Balzac said it best: ‘It is always assumed by the empty-headed, who chatter about themselves for want of something better, that people who do not discuss their affairs openly must have something to hide.’” Hollow-eyed, Pierre places his hand on my arm. “Be candid with me, Emily: am I so loathsome? Isn’t there some quality in me that might appeal to my wife?”

To his wife?

No. Amélie is blinded by her vanity, by her need for celebrity.

By her addiction to Pozzi.

“She doesn’t have the depth of commitment that is only plumbed by true love,” I declare.

“And you do.” Pierre’s statement is not offered as a challenge. Instead, he’s taken by my sincerity.

Doesn’t he see the adoration in my gaze?

Doesn’t he hear my pounding heart?

I’ve always assumed that lovers have telepathy that allows them to simultaneously share the ache of longing and the memory of a caress.

I must be wrong because his hand rises hesitantly only to drop again to pat my wrist absently. But then, he pulls away, shyly, like a bumpkin maneuvering through a shop filled with expensive china.

If he is oblivious to all of this, he must hear it from me, once and for all.

My mouth parts: not to profess knowledge of what I don’t know, but to vow what I do:

“I welcome your love with all my heart, Pierre. And I give mine in return.”

Surprised at my unabashed declaration, his mouth also opens.

And then—slowly, gently, hungrily—our lips meet in a kiss.

For once, I don’t wince as Pierre’s eyes, glazed in sweet anticipation, scan over me.

The touch of his fingertips as they roam up my arms, over my shoulders, and down to my breasts—then tear at the buttons of my blouse—is so desirous that I moan.

Pierre takes this as my tacit approval to continue this rapturous assault, pulling my chemise over my head, then beginning the arduous task of unbuttoning the pearl seed buttons in the front of my corset.

When my breasts are freed from it, he stops to admire them. I think of the models used in the ateliers: women with fleshy breasts and rosy nipples beckoning the eye. But those who paint

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them do so dispassionately. Their focus is on rendering the shape of the breast succinctly and shading it exactly.

Instead, Pierre's gaze is appreciative. It promises to create sensations that will increase my yearnings.

Gently, his finger encircles a nipple. It turns taut at his touch. His tongue takes pleasure in suckling it. I'm already enraptured by the time he does the same to its twin.

I am in bliss.

Fervently, I release the buttons on the waistbands of my skirt and petticoat. Of like mind, Pierre buries his hands beneath the folds of the garments and pulls them below my hips.

I step beyond them. Then, standing naked before him, I watch Pierre's face.

His gaze begins at my feet, then moves up—slowly, inch by inch, until our eyes meet. His smile is just as joyous as mine.

“Will you turn around for me?” he asks.

I hesitate, knowing what he'll see: my disfigured spine and the hard lump of muscle that rises above my right shoulder, creating the illusion that I'm crouching. Vi used to call it my “witch's stance.” She'd run from the room when I set my face in a snarl and curled my fingers into claws.

Pierre isn't scared. Instead, he bends on one knee and kisses my crooked spine. Rising slowly, his mouth creates a damp trail of kisses on my damaged shoulder. When he leans his cheek onto it, he sighs. Eventually, his lips are on the move again, finding their way to my neck.

In time, our lips meet.

To Pierre, I am not a witch. I am adored.

Rabid with anticipation, I pull open the buttons on his shirt, then I do the same to his pants. He shoves them to his ankles and steps out of them. But he hesitates before doing the same with his flannel drawers. He waits for my nod before shedding them too.

I stare at the man in front of me: mid-height and stocky. His legs are a bit bowed. His belly is soft. Many of the curly hairs that blanket his chest are already graying.

All of this is taken in with mere glances. My eye focuses on the thing I am unfamiliar with, but soon I will know intimately.

Even a lifetime spent in museums where the male anatomy is idealized in paint or stone doesn't prepare one for the penis's reality. If it's not a mere bulge beyond a loincloth or fig leaf,

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it's laid bare in repose: a coiled snake nuzzled against two smooth, small stones. But now, viewing it fully erect, I am awed by what I see. Its ragged head bears a slit. Its girth is thicker than I'd expected.

Pierre doesn't flinch when I gauge its length as if my hand was spanning a piano keyboard from the tip of one's thumb to its smallest finger. In that case, Pierre's member measures a full octave.

And from this, one receives pleasure?

As if reading my mind, Pierre asks, "I take it, were we to proceed, I'd be your first lover."

I nod.

Hesitantly, he adds: "We do not have to, you know."

Suddenly, I'm self-conscious. He, too, has had an opportunity to examine me, to compare me with his wife: a woman whom many consider a walking, breathing goddess.

Whereas I'm mostly viewed as a hideous cripple.

Not to Pierre.

Never once has his gaze been anything but adoring or respectful.

Isn't that what love is about?

I have no shame admitting: "If we don't take each other now, I'll always regret having missed the opportunity to prove my love to you."

"And so would I," he declares fervently.

Pierre places me on the bed and then lies beside me.

His hands and mouth skim the terrain of my body. After roaming the peaks of my breasts and the valley between them, his fingers move against my ribcage before one circles the rim of my navel. His lips follow, but they don't stop there. Like damp valentines, his kisses follow the trail of the tiny hairs below my waist until his lips meet the hair crowning my virginity. I brace myself for their dampness. Instead, delicately, he slips a finger into it. When another finger joins it, I groan.

Like pistons, his fingers move in and out slowly, then more quickly. I gasp with joy.

"Shall I stop?" Pierre asks.

Despite my tears, I shake my head.

But when his fingers leave me, my body quakes, mourning their loss.

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A moment later, Pierre slings his body over mine. As we lay chest to chest, his penis, thick and stiff, enters this achingly tight space within me.

At first, his rocking is slow and gentle. But then, he moves faster. Waves of pleasure envelop me. In no time, his frenzy is matched by mine. Breathless gasps give way to delirious moans—and finally, a rapturous cry from me. It is the only way I can express my euphoria.

My bliss.

My joy.

“**Promise you will** never kill yourself,” I whisper.

We’ve been in each other’s arms long enough for the light from the clouded window to shift dimension and location: what was once a large, slanted sunbeam in the center of the floor is now a mere sliver of fading light against the wall.

Slowly, Pierre opens his eyes. “My strange, wondrous creature,” he whispers.

Startled, I look up at him.

“Is something the matter?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. Except... I’d once described Amélie that way—to you.”

Remembering, he cackles mirthlessly.

The frightened hoot of an owl echoes down into the room. It must have been roosting on the cottage’s chimney, but now, through the window, we watch as it swoops off through the pines.

I’m astonished enough that I shiver in Pierre’s arms.

Worried, Pierre clutches me all the tighter. “Are you cold?”

I shake my head. “In Africa, the tribesmen consider owls bad luck and think they bring illness to children,” I explain.

“But we are adults,” he counters.

I take a good look at him. His teeth are uneven. His breath is sour from the previous night’s port, cigars, and anxiety. And yet, the memory of the coarse prickly bristles of his mustache tickling my nose while we kissed makes my cheeks grow warm.

Desire surges through me once more. I smile. “Thank God for that.”

I would have assumed I’d cower at the thought of taking him inside me again. Instead, I crave it even more.

For once, I have no shame in my body.

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I now know its true purpose: to be one with a man.

This man.

CHAPTER 28

EARLY OCTOBER - LES CHÊNES

October has nudged September into a distant memory. I now measure the farewell to summer not by the forest's bottle green leaves shifting to rusty red or tarnished gold but in the number of our trysts: alas, no more than fifteen since I arrived nine weeks ago.

Discretion is of the utmost importance. For me, the imperative is that John finishes Amélie's portrait without disruption. For Pierre, it is that our affair is conducted without scandal.

This is more for Louise's sake than for her mother's.

And so, we bide our time.

It doesn't stop us from sharing longing glances when we cross paths in the garden.

Or risking quick, deep kisses as we pass in empty hallways.

Or stroking a toe against an ankle under the dining room table.

But we live for those precious unbridled rendezvous in the huntsman's cottage.

Our assignations are arranged when one of us leaves a note, written in code, in the center of a book high on a shelf in the library. Pierre insists it is never opened: Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en fer*.

I can see why. Though poetry, it's mindlessly depressing.

Having learned of my virginal state, Pierre now takes the precaution of wearing a French letter when we make love. After the first time, I asked, "Is it comfortable?"

He shrugged. "It can't stop me from enjoying every minute I spend with you. If you're pleased, then I am too."

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“Very much so.” I sighed contentedly. “If only life could stay this way forever.”

During these times, no one seems to have missed us.

One blessing for the plain and the shy is that one only seeks us out when one needs something from us. Pierre’s money provides comfortably for Amélie and her mother. Other than that, they see him as an annoyance.

And whereas he’s courteous with staff, he’s also aloof; and they to him.

As for John, Pierre holds the purse strings for the project. John’s biggest concern—that Pierre may halt it—drives his frustration to complete it.

I can’t tell my brother he need not worry or why. Not that John would believe me.

Consumed with his task, he never questions my disappearances. Thank God for that.

“**Mademoiselle Sargent**, why are you so giddy?” Amélie sniffs.

Startled, even John looks up from the canvas to see how and why I’ve vexed her. When he realizes my only crime is reading silently within her line of sight, he purses his lips, his silent plea that I say nothing that will cause Amélie to break her hand-numbing pose.

My happiness comes from reading the coded note that Pierre left for me, asking that I meet him in the cottage tomorrow morning.

Her foul mood is baggage left behind by her latest clique of visiting confidants. They divulged that Pozzi is again staying at the Divine Sarah’s cottage. Apparently, he’d not informed her he’d be passing this way.

Falling into her capricious verbal traps could banish me from Les Chênes. To mollify her, I reply, “I’m so sorry. I was just thinking about last night’s beautiful sunset beyond the forest. I saw it from my bedroom window.”

Amélie snickers. “Well, don’t get too comfortable here. The silly town election takes place the day after tomorrow. Pedro already knows he’ll lose. Good riddance! Then we can go back to the city.”

I turn away. Because of me, Pierre has neglected his election duties.

In doing so, inadvertently, we may have cut short our time together.

Amélie has succeeded in making me just as melancholy as her.

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The following day, when I get to the cottage, Pierre is already waiting for me. He has left the door open, but now he locks it behind us.

I'm learning that lovemaking is much like a minuet. Although the combination of steps changes with each dance, I now know them well enough to take pleasure from them.

In return, I have also learned to reciprocate such joy.

This is confirmed when Pierre's eyes grow wider and brighten with anticipation before hazing over with satisfaction.

It's validated in his ecstatic groans and pleased sighs.

Like a good composer, the right movement on my part—the touch of a finger, a gentle grasp, a muttered command—inspires my one player's performance.

Together we are a symphony of movement and emotion.

I pray that this is only the prelude to our performance.

After lovemaking, I bury my head on his broad chest while he holds me in his arms. But when I look up, I find him staring down at me with sad eyes.

"The election takes place tomorrow. By all indications, I shall lose." Pierre sounds resigned. "No matter. I leave for Paris in three days to attend France's trade negotiations with Chile. We'll be closing Les Chênes until next spring. It's unavoidable."

"I understand. Still, can't we—"

I hear a voice: Louise's. With a squeal, she screams, "We have found it!"

Hearing her too, Pierre sits up.

Next, we hear Pauline's reply: "Wait for me!"

Not now, I pray. Please, God—she mustn't find us like this: naked and entwined in each other's arms!

We leap out of bed and scramble for our clothes.

The child doesn't listen. A key rattles in the cottage door's lock. "It doesn't work!"

"Perhaps it is rusted," Her governess huffs. "Almost there..."

I've only put on my undergarments when Pierre hisses, "Quick—hide beneath!"

With the rest of my clothes in hand, I drop to the floor and roll under the bed.

Hastily, Pierre drapes the quilt over the mattress. Pants and shirt buttoned, he strides to the door, flinging it open. He has pulled the quilt so low on the side that faces the door that I've only

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two inches to peek out. From this angle, I see what he can't: In my haste to undress, I'd tossed my shoes next to the hearth.

"Ah, finally! You've solved the riddle." No father could sound prouder.

"It was quite difficult, Father," Louise chides him. "But I persevered."

"And so, you have." Is the tone in his voice too cheery? If so, it may raise Pauline's suspicions. I watch their shoes as they walk around the room, taking in the wonder of it all. When Louise reaches the bed, her feet are mere inches from my face. Suddenly the bed's springs creak, and the mattress dips downward, almost touching my nose. I stifle a gasp.

"This bed is much harder than mine," Louise exclaims.

"It is also older and must be treated with respect," Pierre admonishes her.

Thankfully, neither Pauline nor Pierre feel the need to join her on it.

"Oh... So, Mother is here too?"

"Who?... No!" Pierre stutters. "There is no one else here."

Louise leaps off the bed and runs to the hearth. "But...those shoes! Do they belong to the forest's witch?" Louise's voice is tinged with unease. "What if she returns for them?"

"No...she won't," Pierre vows firmly. "The cottage is protected by fairies, as is the path between here and our home. The box on the table. Do you see it?"

Louise's footsteps move in that direction. "How *beautiful!*"

"Open it," her father insists.

Music streams out. "Ah! The fairy song." Relief is now apparent in the girl's tone. But after the last note dies off, she asks: "But... what if the witch returns for her shoes?"

Pierre strides over to her. As her feet rise, I realize he's picked her up and is holding her in his arms. "We will leave them outside the door and lock it behind us," he replies. "Tomorrow, I'll make new keys: one for you and one for me so she can never come in again."

Pierre is right. I can never step foot in this magical place ever again.

I watch as three sets of feet walk out the door. I hear the key turn in the lock.

Still, I wait a good while before coming out from under the bed: until enough time has passed for them to get back to the chateau.

Suddenly, I realize my only way out is through the window. After tumbling from it, I grab my shoes from the door stoop.

I walk away without looking back.

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Once I'm in my room, I'll take off the shoes and hide them in my suitcase.

Sadly, the only other pair I brought on this journey that was to last only a few days were ruined when I fell in the stream. No matter. They'll have to do until I can make my way into Paramé or St. Malo and buy a new pair.

As quietly as possible, I enter the chateau. While passing the main salon, I overhear the two servants restocking the wood in the hearth, bemoaning that other than those employed by Pierre, no villagers plan on voting for him tomorrow.

"To them, he doesn't exist," one sighs.

"Barely to us as well," the other points out.

Amélie was right then. My fairy tale is over.

On my way to breakfast the following day, I've just reached the dining room's door when I hear Amélie say, "Tell me, Pierre: who is your witch?"

I stop short.

There is a long silence. Then Pierre says, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The heat of shame climbs up my neck.

"Another woman has bewitched you. And, apparently, you rut with her in that old huntsman's cottage." Amélie says this matter-of-factly.

"Is that what Pauline told you?"

"So, it's true after all!" Amélie chuckles as merrily as if he has let her in on a delicious tidbit of gossip. "Don't bother to find an innocent to vent your wrath. *Our daughter* saw your whore's shoes. They made quite an impression on her."

"Am I to assume your witch hunt will end with someone burning at the stake?"

"Not at all," Amélie assures him. "I welcome your lover with open arms—just as you must now welcome mine. In fact, I've invited Doctor Pozzi to come to Les Chênes this weekend."

"To hell he is. The man is a pox on our lives!" Pierre's hand hits the table so hard that the china rattles.

For a moment, neither speaks. Finally, Pierre growls, "I have business in Paris to attend to. We're leaving tomorrow, Amélie."

"Feel free to go without me," Amélie purrs. "I have Mother here to chaperone me—and the Sargents."

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Pierre scoffs. “You may as well have no one at all.”

Amélie laughs. “That’s the point.” Her skirts rustle as she rises from the table. “I just pray your whore is not one of the local staff. Finding a replacement in St. Malo and training her would be arduous.”

I take off the ruined shoes so that I may run in stocking feet. Thankfully, I turn the corner just in time. Amélie’s footsteps come my way.

But then, at some point, they stop.

I listen carefully. In time, I hear the echo of her footsteps down another hall.

On the way to dinner, John is whistling: a good sign.

“Amélie sat for you, I take it?” I ask. I stayed away from today’s sitting. I couldn’t bear to face her. Despite what Pierre said about her opinion of me, I’m sure she will be scrutinizing every woman who crosses her path.

My brother’s way of saying yes is to twirl an invisible baton at the make-believe orchestra playing in his head. “Yes, she posed—and she actually behaved herself. In fact, I’ve never seen her so happy.” John puts a finger to his lips, then whispers, “Apparently, Pierre has a lover. Him—*of all people*. Can you imagine?” He winks conspiratorially. “Amélie feels he’ll now be less maudlin around Pozzi. In fact, she has already written Samuel and asked him to join her here over the weekend.” He chuckles. “Afterward, it’s off to Paris. The season starts, and she plans on being in the thick of it. Won’t it feel good to be free of this Godforsaken place? I’ll let you write Mother about that. She’ll be pleased as punch.”

Bile rises in my throat at the thought of returning to my old way of life: one dictated by the whims of others. I nod silently, but instead of following him into dinner, I stop in a water closet to compose myself. No one must see my tears, especially not Pierre.

Before I follow my brother into the dining room, I stop by the library. I’ve prepared a coded note for Pierre, requesting that we rendezvous tonight to say our goodbyes. I’ll tell him I can’t shoulder the consequences of our affair on his family and that we should bring it to an end.

When I open the book, a note is waiting for me. Pierre also requests that we meet tomorrow morning, by the stream with my paints and easel.

As to our joined fate, I assume he is of like mind. I’m heartbroken, but I have no regrets.

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While walking toward the dining room, I urge myself to smile. Despite feigning disinterest, I'm sure that Amélie is curious about who has won her husband's affections.

For John's sake, the last person I want her to guess is me. If he weren't the issue, I couldn't care less.

Pierre deserves my love.

If only he could accept it.

I rise to a glorious day. Mother Nature wants to play along with our ruse.

Pierre is already at the stream. He has waded in and is fishing. As this is his last day here, perhaps until spring, it would not be out of place for anyone to question this.

I set up my easel, palette, and paints. Then I go to work. In time, Pierre ambles over as if to see my progress. Should anyone come our way without us noticing their presence, the stream's flow provides enough ambient sound to drown out our conversation.

Pierre's smile is amiable enough. No one would know that his first words are terse: "She knows."

"I overheard your conversation at breakfast yesterday." I hesitate. "Does she suspect me?"

"No. You'd be the last person on Earth..." He sees immediately that this assured response both relieves and chagrins me. "It's for the best," he insists.

"I know." I shrug. "You should assure her that the alliance is over, that you have no interest in breaking up your marriage."

Pierre's eyes open wide. "But that's not true."

"Are you saying that you would divorce her—for me?"

"Yes, Emily." He peers intently at me. "Why do you find that so hard to believe?"

"For the same reason everyone else will."

"Not those who know us," he insists.

"Those who know us would be hurt the most."

"You heard Amélie. Our affair absolves her of her own guilt." He sneers. "As if she ever felt any."

"I—we—cannot ruin John's opportunity!" I exclaim.

"He'll be paid his commission," Pierre insists.

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“The commission is not as important to him as showing his masterpiece in the Paris Salon! Otherwise, all his efforts are for naught. Worse yet, if I were the cause of your divorce, the notoriety would ruin him with future patrons.”

“Eight months from now?” Pierre’s head shakes in frustration. When he has collected himself, he mutters, “If it’s important to you, Emily, we will wait. But I swear to you: after the Salon, nothing will stop me from leaving her to be with you—”

“Pierre, please think! Even if you feel Amélie would accept divorce in the hope that Pozzi follows suit, you must know it would not be the best decision for Louise’s future.”

His silence bears this out.

“Then, we are in agreement.” Despite what I declare, my heart breaks at the thought of never being with him again.

“No! I...I will not let you go,” he murmurs.

How I long to throw my arms around him. I want to feel his lips on mine.

I can’t stop Pierre from doing precisely what I’ve just hoped for. He takes my hand and pulls me behind a broad oak, one with a trunk thick enough to shield us from prying eyes. Hearing my sobs, he shushes me. Seeing the tears in my eyes, he kisses them away. Knowing the depth of my despair, he pulls me close and clings to me as if letting me go may send him flying off the precipice of loneliness at a breakneck speed.

I hold on tightly, all the while knowing that, in a moment, I must release him forever.

But what the mind knows to be true is not always felt by the heart.

How I ache to feel him inside of me.

How I long to stay at his side, forever.

And yet, inevitably, we part.

“I will see you when you return to Paris,” Pierre vows. “If you still insist that we keep our love a secret until after the Salon, I will honor that. But afterward, we will spend the rest of our lives together.”

“Yes,” I whisper, “Always and forever.”

Because together, we are one: body, heart, mind, and soul.

CHAPTER 29

“**Goodness, Mademoiselle Sargent.** How unlike you to be in such a sulky mood.” Amélie’s sneer undermines her caring tone.

Ironically, she’s right. Between yesterday when Pierre left for Paris and today with Pozzi’s imminent arrival, I feel as if Amélie and I have exchanged demeanors. She glows at the thought that her lover will soon be in her arms, whereas I’ve been listlessly mourning my beloved’s departure.

I shrug. “Forgive me, Madame Gautreau. The rain makes me melancholy.”

In truth, I wish to be anywhere but near her.

To make matters worse, Amélie has been chattering incessantly. The gaiety in her voice is excruciating.

I don’t know how John puts up with it.

If it weren’t raining, I would have hidden in my room and worked on the painting of Louise and Pierre, which is near completion. I look forward to surprising Pierre with it when we are finally reunited.

But John made it clear that today my presence—particularly my discerning eye—would be greatly appreciated. He’s still unsure about many issues that may decide the portrait’s future: the shading around Amélie’s form, the size of the ear on display, and *always* the color of her skin. It drives him to distraction. He claims it is a kaleidoscope, changing color from blue to lavender to mauve, depending on the light that captures it at any given moment.

To increase John’s apprehension, he realizes that today’s sitting may be their last. Between Pozzi’s appearance and the fall and spring social seasons, Amélie has every excuse to avoid another sitting between now and the painting’s unveiling.

Last night at dinner, to Amélie’s surprise, Pierre agreed to have the painting unveiled at the Salon. Then he turned to John and said, “In appreciation of your diligence and patience, before I

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leave early in the morning, I'll place an envelope with a cheque for twice the agreed-upon amount in the painting salon."

A thousand francs...

"But... It's the custom that the portrait is finished before payment," John stammered.

Pierre stared for a moment, weighing John's intent. In time, he murmured, "As you wish."

Considering John's financial situation, the offer was genuine and heartfelt. Still, John's stance was prudent. The last thing he wants is to give the impression that he's in dire straits. Instead, he'll take on other commissions. The sooner, the better.

Thankfully, Amélie's busy schedule will allow John to do just that in the coming months.

Like an excited little girl whose parent has returned from a long journey, Amélie greets Pozzi with a childish squeal and a frantic hug, then clings to him as they walk up the steps and into the chateau. As for John, reserved congeniality is his most comfortable role and one he embodies now.

I watch all of this from the tower's turret window.

And then I go to my room, where I paint until I hear a servant's knock on my door. I cover the painting of her master and his daughter before allowing her into the room with the dinner tray I requested. After eating my meal, I leave for a walk. Though darkness has fallen, the garden's paths are familiar to me now. I'll walk to the stream where Pierre and I shared our last kiss.

I pass the windows of the grand salon. By now, Amélie and the men have also finished eating and have retired there.

John is playing Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Opus 23*. I imagine Pozzi and Amélie are sitting side-by-side on a settee. Perhaps, her head is tilted up, always available for his kisses.

The ballad's dark tumultuous tone is the perfect accompaniment to my getaway.

"Your brother was miffed that you chose to take dinner to your room." The flicker of Pozzi's cigar is merely a spark: not enough illumination for me to see him. Instead, his form is outlined by the lack of light around it. Only when he steps closer does the gentle glow of the night's three-quarter moon reveal features that set him apart from less handsome men: high cheekbones, deep-set eyes, thick curly hair, and a goatee and mustache that would make Satan proud.

"Frankly, I thought you'd appreciate some privacy with your... paramour," I explain.

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Pozzi snickers. “Thank God John isn’t as insightful. Otherwise, it will be a dull week indeed.” He shrugs. “Man cannot live on love alone. Lively discussion is just as intoxicating.”

“From what I’ve been told, the difference between Madame Bernhardt and Madame Gautreau is that only the former offers both.”

“Sadly, yes,” Pozzi admits.

Suddenly, it dawns on me. “You’ve grown tired of Amélie!”

Samuel grins. “Your perception is the greatest gift of your affliction.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.”

“Doesn’t it? To observe without being noticed? Be honest with yourself.” He taps a spark from his cigar. “In any event, let it be our little secret, shall we?”

I shrug. When it becomes clear to her, Amélie will be heartbroken. Will Pierre care?

No. It’s too late. He sees her for who she is.

And besides, he loves me now.

I look up to find Samuel watching me. As if reading my mind, he chuckles. “Be honest with me: will you be spending the rest of your stay in your room?”

“Hardly. Les Chênes is a large, beautiful estate. Now that the rain has let up, I’ll spend it outside: painting. So, please, don’t worry that you’ll be imposing on me.”

“You don’t like me.” Is Pozzi’s declaration meant to take me by surprise? Am I supposed to deny it out of courtesy—or worse yet, from the guilt that I may hurt his feelings?

I don’t turn from his stare, which pierces, or is it supposed to mesmerize?

On me, now it has neither effect. Unlike most women, who would be thrilled by such casual flirtation, his attentiveness is no more than an annoying distraction.

He doesn’t understand that I’m no longer the shy spinster he once knew. Now, nothing he says or does embarrasses me.

Instead of shirking from him, I reply: “And you don’t like being ignored.”

“Are you accusing me of being vain?”

“Would you admit to it if I were?”

He laughs uncontrollably. “Ah, Emily. I like this new you.”

“I’m glad, Samuel. Alas, I wish I could say the same of you, but I don’t find lying useful in any situation. Others may be hurt.”

“If you mean Amélie, you needn’t worry. She doesn’t view you as a threat.”

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“Nor should she. Beyond your need to converse with someone on a topic other than gossip, I hold no attraction to you. I was referring to Thérèse... and Pierre. And your children.”

“They are used to such indiscretions,” Pozzi huffs. “They love us despite them.”

At that moment, I feel sorry for him. “Only time will tell if your assumption is right.”

His gaze moves away from me.

Now that teasing me has lost its attraction, I can walk away, assured that he won’t bother me the rest of our time together.

CHAPTER 30

In the week since Pierre left, I've noticed my lack of appetite is a symptom of missing him.

As I come in for breakfast, I quickly discover another is nausea. The sight of soft-boiled quail eggs upon potato galettes has me breathing deeply to keep it at bay.

I settle for a cup of tea and dry toast.

Louise sits at the other end of the table with Pauline and Amélie. Seeing me, the little girl exclaims, “Bonjour, Mademoiselle Emily!” Having rescued her boat, I'm no longer a curiosity but a friend.

I wish them all a good morning. There is no malice in the governess' smile. As for Amélie, she ignores me.

I take that as a good sign. I would not be spared taunts if she suspected I was her husband's lover. Nor would John or I still be welcomed here.

Louise, who has been cuddling her new kitten, thinks nothing of letting it lap at her bowl of oatmeal.

Amélie must find this as distasteful as me because she claps her hands at the culprit. “Stop it!... Pauline, take that wretched animal out of here.”

The cat stares at her coldly, all the while licking its paws.

Watching it, my stomach jolts. The others watch, horrified at the eruption—remnants of last night's dinner and bile.

Covering my mouth with my napkin, I stagger to my feet. “I'm so, so sorry... Excuse me.”

Amélie's stare has the same effect on me: my stomach lurches again. But this time, the only thing left in my gut—bile—spatters my skirt.

In a moment, Amélie is beside me. “No, no—sit. Please.”

Awed by the tenderness of her urgent command, I ease into a chair.

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She takes another beside me but says nothing. Instead, her eyes search mine. Shame flushes through me at the thought that this new demeanor somehow gives her a window into my soul.

The only indication that Amélie notices this change is when she purses her mouth.

But she says nothing.

Finally, still holding my hand, she leans back into her chair. Then sweetly but firmly, she murmurs, “Pauline, take Louise out to play. The woodsman’s cottage, perhaps.”

Does she feel my flinch? If so, she doesn’t show it.

Wordlessly, Pauline does as she’s told, closing the door behind her.

Before I can stop Amélie, she lays a hand on my breast. I wince: not because of any pain induced by her but because it is unusually tender.

She sighs. “I’ve had a similar malady.”

“Oh...” I’m surprised by her candidness. “Surely, it’s not serious?”

“It could be, indeed.” Hesitantly, she adds: “I notice a swelling here as well.” She pats my stomach.

I lean back, embarrassed. “I attribute it to Les Chênes’ generous meals.”

She chuckles. “It’s why I curb my appetite. Otherwise, my gowns would need letting out. Men have no such concerns. Pierre is a great example of that.” She tilts her head to one side. “But surely your long walks throughout the estate would relieve *you* of such worries.”

“The terrain is lovely here.”

“Ah. Then you’ve had the opportunity to trek through our woods.” Amélie leans in expectantly.

“Yes. I...” It dawns on me:

She knows about Pierre and me in the cottage.

“But I...I prefer the stream. The light is perfect around it. It is an ideal setting for a painter.” My declaration is undermined by my shaking voice.

She says nothing. Her grin, hard like granite, reminds me of an illustration I once saw of the Great Sphinx of Giza.

In time, she rises. “Doctor Pozzi will have the perfect tonic. Wait here, and I’ll get him.”

I nod because there is nothing I can do.

The thought that she may suspect my relationship with Pierre has me vomiting again.

Thank God Amélie has already left the room.

Before Pozzi's appearance, I have plenty of time to clean up my mess. By the time he taps on the door, the spot on the Oriental rug is a faint damp stain.

"Come in," I answer as heartily as possible.

Pozzi enters, carrying his medical valise. His face shows concern. "Madame Gautreau informs me you are not feeling well."

"I'm sure it's nothing. Perhaps a cold."

"With Louise around, I am more concerned it may be influenza. Vomiting is one of its symptoms, as is lack of an appetite." He shakes his head sadly. "I have recommended that Amélie send Madame Avegno to St. Malo with the child. They're packing now." He pulls out a stethophone. "May I?"

He has frightened me enough that I nod my consent.

He places the instrument on my chest. "Please breathe deeply."

I obey.

"Hmmm." He frowns. "Open your blouse, please." Noting my alarm, he adds, "Just the first three buttons."

Reluctantly, I do so. He listens again through the instrument. He also takes note of my breast beneath my camisole. "Have your breasts been swelling?"

Blushing, I turn away. "Yes."

"And your stomach is tender?"

"I assume Amélie mentioned that as well?"

"She has been ill before. And she worries about Louise." Pozzi takes his valise to the sideboard. There, he pours water into a glass. He pulls a pouch from his bag. With a spoon, he scoops some powder into the glass and stirs it before walking back to me. "Drink all of this. Its effect should be quick. You'll be back to painting in no time."

I glance at it a long moment before downing it.

"Sit still. You'll feel its effect soon enough," Pozzi insists.

He's right. I feel better...

Lightheaded...

I stand up.

But then I stumble.

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Pozzi catches me as I fall.

John comes through the door. Seeing me, his grin fades, replaced by open-mouthed horror.

He runs to me...

I want to say something, but my throat locks up, and my eyes flutter...

Darkness...

Hummingbirds...

They drone on about such unpleasantness.

About me.

In time I make out voices and then words:

Pozzi is saying: *...must operate. If we don't cut it out, the consequences may be too great...*

At this point, John starts to cry.

Pozzi comforts him. *You nor Emily will bear any shame*, he insists to John. *I'm recognized as the best surgeon in Europe for ovarian cysts. And as to her future health with such matters, I assure you, there is nothing to worry about...*

Odd. He mentions nothing of pneumonia...

Through drowsy eyes, I glance around. I'm now in my bedroom suite. My skirt has been replaced by merely a sheet.

Two men rush in. Pozzi says something...

Interns...St. Malo's hospital...

And then:

This man is...best anesthetist in the area...

One walks toward me with a bottle and a towel. Amélie, who stands in the doorway, shepherds my sobbing brother out of the room.

I try to call out to John, to tell him it is only pneumonia, but then the man holds the cloth to my nose and...

Darkness again.

The pain—

Excruciating.

Though my eyelids fight to stay shut, I force them open.

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The other intern holds something up...

Bloody...

Tiny...as if...

A fairy? ...

No... No wings.

It stares at me with no eyes...

The man bemoans, “Doctor, is the fetus too small for your teaching purposes?”

Fetus? ...

My scream terrifies one of the men so badly that he jumps away.

Pozzi turns around from the basin where he has been washing his arms. His smock is spattered with blood. He turns and runs to me. Though he tries to hold me down onto the bed, I struggle to sit up; to beat him with my fists:

I hope to scratch out his eyes.

He yells for the others. While the taller intern pins my arms, the shorter man lunges in, wrapping my face in the towel again.

Amélie has rushed to the doorway, where she stands, horrified, and fascinated at the same time. As I drift off, I see her relieved smirk.

My last thought is that she and Pozzi knew about Pierre and me.

They have lied to John about my illness...

When I wake again, I am alone.

The hills that flank Les Chênes on its eastern border are rimmed by the rising sun’s glow.

I must have slept through the night.

Raising my arm, I see that I’m now dressed in my sleeping gown. As I shift my hips, the immense pain reminds me of the operation on the cyst.

No—

The abortion.

Pierre and I were to have a child.

The thought of what Pozzi did to me—at Amélie’s instruction—revolts me.

Were Pierre to know, would he feel the same way?

Would he shoot Pozzi?

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Perhaps he will shoot Amélie, too, for such a horrific sin.

Or I will.

The thought of seeing them again makes my blood boil.

Despite my agony, I rise from the bed. A bloody rag falls from beneath my sleeping gown onto the floor. Seeing it, I throw up.

When I lift my head, I notice the shoes beside my bed: the ones Louise saw in the cottage. Amélie must have found them in my trunk while searching for my nightgown.

I can't stay here another moment.

Otherwise, I will kill her.

Slowly I ease myself toward the closet and dress.

Then I pack my things.

Gingerly, I open my door. Pauline sleeps in a chair beside it. At first, I'm surprised since I'd assumed she had accompanied Louise and her grandmother to St. Malo. Now I realize she was left behind to nurse me.

Ha! The one who betrayed me? *That is not to be.*

I nudge her so that she awakens. Then, in a voice I don't recognize—hoarse and cold like steel, one threatening enough to etch dread in her face—I growl: "Have my things taken outside. Then order the carriage around." Leaning so close that our faces touch, I hiss: "*Say nothing to the butchers!*"

Nodding silently, she runs through the hall and down the stairs.

I doubt anyone will stop me. If anything, they'll think, "Good riddance."

I feel the same about them.

As to what I feel for Pierre:

Sadness. Concern.

Love.

He is married to a monster.

How will I explain to him Amélie and Pozzi's horrendous act?

I have no answer to that. Perhaps the right one will come to me on the train ride to Paris.

I leave the shoes outside Amélie's door. I see no blood on them. If there is a God, after she has them burned, she will be cursed with nightmares of them covered in my child's blood.

CHAPTER 31

PARIS

My arrival at Boulevard Berthier is a surprise to John's small staff. I find the manservant weeping from bourbon-induced melancholia and the cook in tears of frustration over the mess he's made of her kitchen pantry. After locking the drunken sod in his room, I assure Cook that John's return is imminent, which means the manservant will be gone soon.

Grateful, she hugs me.

I stifle the urge to scream from her ecstatic jostling of my pain-wracked body.

In the meantime, I tell her to hide the wine and spirits, even any used for cooking.

After what John witnessed, I assumed he would show up the next day, but no.

What could have detained him?

I wish to send a note to Pierre at Rue Jouffroy, but considering the circumstances, I don't know how much I should say in writing regarding Pozzi's assault if anything at all. Perhaps it would be best to invite him here and tell him in person?

John will know the best course of action. I stalk the floor of my room, anxiously waiting for him.

On my third day in Paris, a telegram finally arrives from John informing me that he'll be on today's train from St. Malo. Thank God. I tell Cook to prepare a meal. I'm sure he'll be famished.

John arrives home at ten in the evening. He seems surprised to see me still awake, let alone dressed and waiting to dine with him. His demeanor is anxious and tired.

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We eat in silence. I'm sure John is wondering what I'm thinking, just as I can't imagine what scenarios are roiling through his mind.

Once the table is cleared, and the doors are shut, he moves to sit beside me.

"Tell me all you remember of... of the other day," he begs.

I tell him of my nausea. I mentioned Amélie insisted it may be influenza, and if so, she was concerned for Louise and insisted Pozzi be informed.

When I mention Pozzi's assurance that the tonic will cure my nausea, John's lower lip quivers at the doctor's duplicity.

As I recall John's appearance in the dining room, he gawks at me. "My God, Emily! I hope you don't think that I... that I..." He stands up, livid. "Pozzi and Amélie were adamant that we were to get you upstairs as soon as possible. He said your vomiting—and swelling, too—indicated an ovarian cyst."

"Pozzi lied."

John's eyes open wide at the cold steeliness of my declaration. Warily, he asks, "Then... what caused it?"

"I... I was with child."

John's gasp seems to deflate him. Unable to steady himself, he drops onto the sofa.

My eyes don't waver from his. "John, Pozzi gave me a sleeping draught. Then, while I was incapacitated, he aborted my baby."

My brother's silence fills the room.

Finally: "Emily... Dr. Pozzi removed a cyst that could have endangered your life! Are you certain the baby wasn't part of some...surreal dream?"

Angrily, I stand up. "*A dream?* Johnny—I heard them! I saw them! Those men with their smug, dispassionate faces! They were so heartless, so coldblooded! —about...*my baby.*" I choke through my declaration. "It's as real to me now as it was then."

All color leaves John's face. "What did you hear?"

"When I awakened, your 'very brilliant creature'—*Samuel Pozzi*—was deciding *whether to use my fetus as a specimen in his surgery class.*"

Groaning, John buries his head in his hands.

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I go to his side. Based on who I was before Pierre inspired me to be the woman I am now, John's disbelief is understandable. I put my hand on his shoulder to reinforce my forgiveness for his doubting me.

In time, he looks up at me. "Emily...think, please: should others find out about this, it would...It would sca...sca...*scandalize* us!" John's stutter indicates just how upsetting he finds this notion.

"Yes, I've thought of that." I shrug. "Frankly, I see no need to tell anyone. In saying that, I include Mother and Father."

He sighs, relieved. "I... I'm glad you feel that way." Tenderly, he holds me close.

Absently, I stroke his beard. It's not as burly as Pierre's...

A thought strikes me: "John, aren't you curious who my child's father was?"

He blushes. "You don't... I mean... Only... Only if you wish to tell me."

"I do." I seek out his eyes to cipher his reaction to this news: "Pierre Gautreau."

John casts his eyes downward.

"Are you surprised?" I ask.

"Yes. ... Of course." Still avoiding my gaze, he adds: "I suppose your affair has put the Gautreau commission in jeopardy."

"In fact, the opposite is true. Didn't Pierre make it obvious when he offered to double your commission—and to pay it in advance?"

"I'm more concerned that he'll refuse to allow me to show it at the Salon," John admits.

"There's no need to worry. Pierre swore he'd never do that to you no matter what happens between him and me. Frankly, as much as he is awed by the painting, he sees it as some sort of penance for Amélie."

John scoffs. "That's far from flattering."

"It's no reflection on you. Pierre considers the portrait a masterpiece. By that remark, he meant its existence would always remind her of what she'll never have, as long as she lives."

"And what is that?" John asks.

"Immortal beauty," I reply. "Don't you see? He welcomes the painting's success."

"How about you, Emily? Can you envision the painting's success subverting your plans with Pierre?"

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“Not at all,” I insist. “I didn’t know I was with child, so I had no opportunity to inform him. But you should know Pierre had already agreed to wait until after the Salon before asking for a divorce.”

“Yes, yes! That is for the best.” John stands up. “Emily, perhaps you should forgo informing him of the pregnancy and”—he pauses, staring out the window as if the words he seeks are beyond it—“Amélie’s connivance.”

“Ignore her monstrous deed?” I sputter, “You...you cannot be serious!”

“Yes—serious and candid.” John turns to me. “Think it through as he might, or any man. Enthralled as you were with Pierre, had you purposely tried to get pregnant?”

“Of course not!” I blush. “It just...happened.”

“An act that would have put him in an awkward position,” John points out. “To men of Pierre’s class and distinction—and as you insist, scruples—a mistress who is with child would be an inconvenience. Surely, even if he didn’t care about its effect on Amélie, he’d be concerned for Louise.”

“He was...” I concede. “When Pierre insisted on getting a divorce to marry me, I told him he shouldn’t, for Louise’s sake. But he is adamant. He said he, too, deserved a life filled with love. But he has also agreed to wait until after the Salon before starting divorce proceedings. He’ll confirm this to you himself. I’ll write him now and ask that he meet with us.”

“No.” John declares. “The note should come from me. That way, if Amélie has returned to Paris, neither she—nor any of the servants—will suspect anything. I shall write it tonight and have it delivered first thing in the morning.”

“If you insist.”

“I do!” His adamancy surprises me until I realize he’ll do whatever is necessary to protect me.

Just as I would do for him.

CHAPTER 32

Every day, I jump when I hear the post fall through the box in the door. Then I run to see if Pierre has responded to John’s letter.

An entire fortnight passes before a note from Pierre, addressed to John, is delivered by a courier. I’d never been so happy to have opened my front door!

When John comes home, I hand it to him and watch as he slices the envelope. His eyes scan it. Finally, he puts it down. “Pierre will be here tomorrow morning, ten o’clock. He asks to meet with me first.”

“You see?” I chide him. “He’ll assure you no scandal will occur before the Salon.”

John frowns. “Even after he hears about Amélie’s duplicity?”

“Please, Johnny. Trust him, as I do.”

“Should he do as you hope, I’ll be the first to raise a glass to your happiness.” John shrugs. “Listen carefully, Emily. If Amélie suspects he will be angry at her and that a divorce is imminent—or that he may claim her to be an unfit mother—she may have already hired detectives to build up her case. They may be watching this house.”

“Oh. . . .”

John continues: “When Pierre arrives, I should answer the door. You must stay upstairs until I call you down to relay the details of the horrific event. Of course, I’ll verify my role as a witness and tell of the lie they used to coerce my approval of the scheme. Then, together, we three will discuss how to proceed.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I see Pierre standing across the street a few minutes before the appointed time.

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I read the anxiety in his stance. He flexes his fists and starts to cross the street but then thinks better of it and steps back onto the sidewalk. In doing so, he jostles a man, who raises his hand and voice to him, only to hear Pierre snarl back. Frightened, the man rushes away.

To bide the few moments before crossing the street, Pierre nervously taps his right foot, anxious for the interminable seconds to pick up speed. Surely, like me, he wishes for the strength to tilt the world on its axis so that time works in our favor.

“We are strong,” I say aloud.

We’ll know soon enough if my vow is faithful, for the grandfather clock in the hall downstairs is now striking ten, and Pierre is crossing the street.

The studio’s two large windows jut out from the roofline slightly. Standing on a chair, I can hold onto the thin slice of wall between them and watch as John opens the door to my beloved.

I can’t hear their words, but I have a bird’s eye view of their faces. With a benign smile, John says something while taking a slight step back, but Pierre just stands there. Perplexed by what John says, he doesn’t cross the threshold. Instead, he frowns. His words must be harsh because John reels back, disbelieving. John’s chin thrusts forward: a sign that he’s angry. His retort has Pierre shaking his head adamantly.

How I wish I could hear what they’re saying!

To my alarm, Pierre turns abruptly and leaves. When he glances back at John, I see the cold anger in his eyes.

I beat on the window, but he doesn’t hear me, let alone look up to see me.

Finally, I drop my hand. My gaze turns back to John.

He’s staring up at me. His eyes are filled with pity.

I run down the stairs.

“What happened?” I ask.

John holds his head as if it aches. “I asked him to come in, but he refused. He said he’d been surprised to receive my missive and mentioned it to Amélie.”

Dumfounded, I exclaim, “She’s been home for a fortnight as well?”

“Apparently so.”

Shocked by this turn of events, I murmur, “Go on.”

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“Like you, I asked why he waited so long to respond. He said Amélie must have suspected my true reason for writing him because she confessed to the deed.”

“How angry he must have been with her.”

“Pierre claims he was. But...” John hesitates. “Then he admitted Amélie’s vile act brought about...relief.”

“*Relief?*... That’s ludicrous! Knowing what Amélie and Pozzi have done to me, he’d be livid,” I exclaim.

“At them—or at you?”

Warily, I ask, “What are you saying?”

“You said Pierre was fine with putting off divorcing Amélie until after the Salon. But your pregnancy would have forced his hand to decide more quickly. Pierre said he abhorred what his wife and her lover had done to you but that he’d be lying if he didn’t acknowledge that the horrible incident made him realize how right you were to insist that his primary obligation is to Louise. He also said that seeing you again would not be fair to either of you. He requested that I make his apologies on his behalf for this choice. That...that doing so may possibly save his marriage.”

I double over as if I’d been punched in the gut.

John takes my arm until I can breathe again. “I’m sorry, Emily,” he murmurs.

As John predicted, Pierre chose her: Amélie.

Casting off John’s hand, I fall to the floor. My cries start as screams, but, in time, they are no more than dry heaves.

When I calm down, I realize that John is on his knees and holding me in his arms.

In time, John murmurs, “So, you feel—and I support your feelings in this—that we should put the incident behind us?”

As if I’d never loved Pierre.

As if he’d never loved me back.

Though stunned at the thought, I nod.

So be it.

“I will be here for you, always, Emmy,” John whispers.

1884

CHAPTER 33

FEBRUARY - PARIS

“As always, Nice during the holidays served as a great respite for us Sargents,” John declares. “But I’m glad you’ll soon have some time to yourself in Ireland.”

I shrug. “Even Mother was relieved to see me leave for Paris.” Her intuition was strong enough to pick up on my melancholy. Repeatedly, I denied that it resulted from any specific incident. I was loath for her to know its cause.

As we’d sworn, John and I have kept it a secret from her.

Until I leave for Ireland, I’ll avoid those who come for sittings by cloistering myself in John’s library. Not that I need worry that Amélie will appear. She’s leaving further artistic decisions in John’s hands and knows he’ll not show the portrait unless it meets his exacting standards.

Perhaps she’s afraid of crossing paths with me.

She should be.

While I hope that’s the case, I doubt it. It would indicate a guilty conscience.

As if Amélie has any conscience at all.

My time here has a new purpose. I confidently declare, “Tomorrow, I have an interview at Académie Julian.” Noting my brother’s surprise, I add, “I made my application in November. The invitation to interview came in January. I’ll be meeting with Monsieur Bouguereau.” My gaze intently for a reason: I mustn’t waver from this question: “John, when we agreed to... to put the incident behind us, you vowed to be there for me, always.”

Nodding, he replies simply, “Yes.”

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“I have some money saved, but not enough for the tuition, should it be offered. You’ve been quite generous with others: Paul, Carroll....” My voice trails off.

Is he going to make me grovel?

Why would he, after what I’ve been through because of...

Of her.

I can’t stop myself from gazing at Amélie’s painting.

Realizing this, John murmurs, “Of course, I’ll help you. I’ll even write a letter of recommendation.”

Tearfully, I vow, “I won’t let you down, Johnny.”

“No, you’d never do that, Emily.” I assume the dullness in his voice reflects his memory of the sordid incident.

We must move beyond it together.

The sooner, the better. “Thank you, brother.” I squeeze his hand. “I realize a strong portfolio holds the key to my admission. Will you review it?”

“Yes...of course!” The alacrity in John’s voice is offset by the concern in his eyes. My doubt melts away when he adds: “We can do so now if you’d like.”

I lift my portfolio onto the table.

John suggests just a few substitutions. Since his choices are ones I also like, I take all his recommendations to heart.

He won’t see three oil paintings I’ve left in my trunk: that of Pierre and Louise at the stream and my final rendition of the huntsman’s cottage.

The other is my rendition of Louise Burckhardt. I’d only finished it last month. Time away from it gave me some much-needed perspective. My portrait isn’t as cruel as John’s. Instead, her gaze has the hope of freedom from all that makes her anxious and unsure.

John will only view these paintings if they sell in a gallery.

Perhaps not even then. He might buy them because the thought that others would see them could be too painful for him.

For me, that’s no longer the case.

Afterward, our conversation turns to the one thing that has obsessed John since returning to Paris last month: Amélie’s portrait.

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By that, I mean *both of them*. In the time we've been apart, he's created a duplicate. Having painted over the original canvas too many times, John felt he'd lost perspective.

The only thing worse than one Amélie is two of her.

Frankly, it's a sound move practiced by other artists in this case. It doesn't fail John now. He's looked at it with fresh eyes. The original portrait is thick with many layers of paint. One niggling feature after another has been scraped and repainted. The one issue still vexing John is Amélie's skin tone. Over time, it's been many hues: from the palest shades of rose to lavender, and then back to a dull white shadowed with a blue tinge.

Another concern: the gown's skirt. Whereas it was once fuller, the view of her bustle on her left side has been removed, slimming her hips. Its train no longer hinders the right hand which once held it.

And then there was John's dilemma with the portrait's background, which has gone from dark to light and back to dark again.

Whereas its lines are cleaner and the skin tone now exacting to the original—which is true to life but even more flattering—the replica has far to go to be complete. The whole lower half of the gown has yet to be painted. The same goes for the table's legs.

"Do you truly believe you have time to complete the duplicate before the Salon?" I ask.

John throws up his hands. "Attempting it is driving me mad!" He paces the floor. "At the same time, I've yet to finish the portrait of Albert's mother. I also have some commissions in progress: two American ex-patriots—Mrs. Moore, and Henrietta Ruebell."

"I've heard of the latter. Her salons are all the rage."

John nods. "I've attended a few of them. At last week's event, Daisy White was there, raving about my portrait of her. Oh, and..." John grins slyly, "I met the novelist, Henry James."

"That's marvelous, Johnny!" My brother knows Mr. James is my favorite author and Mother's too.

"Henrietta brought him and Isa Boit to her sitting last week."

"So, Mr. James saw your 'masterpiece.'"

John winces at my taunt, then shrugs. "I got the feeling he did not think much of it. However, he's invited me to stay with him in London during the last week in March while I prepare for the portrait of Mrs. Albert Vickers and perhaps another of her daughters. Henrietta—that is, Etta—

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will also be there. Since the date of the visit coincides with your return from Ireland, you shall meet him then.”

“I’d be honored.” I turn and stare at the replica.

To my surprise, although John has painted the left strap, the other shoulder has none.

My gaze shifts to the original portrait. It faces the same dilemma.

“You haven’t painted the strap on her right shoulder,” I point out.

“While she posed, the shoulder’s angle made it impossible for the damn thing to stay up.”

John snickers. “Pozzi teased her that it was scandalously alluring.” Suddenly realizing to whom he is speaking and of whom, my brother drops his head in shame.

In the months since the incident, I’ve noticed a cold numbness in my attitude toward others. Now that I’m back in Paris—and hearing Johnny so casually mention the names of those who cut out my child and my heart at the same time—I realize what has taken their place:

A glacier of icy hate.

I’m no longer afraid of what others can say or do to me. Pozzi and Amélie—and yes, Pierre too—have done their very worst.

And yet, I’m still alive.

If need be, I, too, can be just as devious.

I think of the first time I saw Amélie in the opera box. How tantalized Pozzi was when the gauzy strap of her gown slipped off her shoulder, revealing the taut pink bud of her breast!

How reluctant he was to nudge the strap into place.

Scandal was avoided then.

And now, the chance to expose something even viler about her presents itself to me.

If John paints the strap as if it has carelessly fallen off her shoulder, will the public see it as a metaphor for the sitter’s equally careless reputation?

If so, Amélie will receive the sort of notoriety she rightly deserves.

There is only one way to find out.

Casually, I say, “Heaven forbid, but for once, I actually agree with Pozzi. A fallen strap would make her—at least, the Amélie in the painting—undeniably mesmerizing.”

John takes a step forward. His eyes grow large as if seeing the portrait for the first time.

A moment later, he picks up his palette. With a few furious brushstrokes—a flourish of ochre, a wisp of brown, a dab of bright yellow shadowed in gray—the ornate silver chain securing

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the gown on the right side is now several inches below her shoulder at a diagonal angle to where one would imagine the nipple of her right breast resides.

As if it has taken a careless fall.

Hardly.

“John... Perhaps it’s too daring?” I only say that to gauge his belief in the result, praying he won’t change his mind.

“I...I think not...” As his stare grows, so does his smile until he’s downright jubilant.

Now he owns the act.

“I’m sure Duran will feel likewise,” he adds.

“Carolus? ... What does he have to do with it?” Does John hear the derision in my voice?

“I invited him over tomorrow evening so that he may give his opinion on it,” John explains. “His appraisal will be honest, and time is of the essence. I’m returning late from London and will have less than a day to complete any further changes.”

“I see.” My reply may be casual, but my thoughts are anything but that.

The fallen strap may not be a *fait accompli* after all.

Duran’s comments will be interesting indeed.

CHAPTER 34

“**You have your brother’s** sense of proportion and balance.” Scanning my painting of Pierre and Louise, William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s statement relieves me. Until now, he’s merely glanced at most of what is in my portfolio.

I stand in awe of him—and all of Académie Julian. Despite the formality of its structure, there’s a casual camaraderie between its students and instructors. The depth and elegance of Monsieur Bouguereau’s works—always in the traditional style and on subjects from mythology to religion—are why his classes are amongst the academy’s most popular.

What a joy it would be to have him as a mentor.

His gaze now fixes on one of the painting’s details (the elation in Louise’s face, I think) before moving to another (the way Pierre holds her boat, I’m sure) and then finds its way to me.

“I hope you find it a good trait, monsieur.” My grin trembles; therefore, my words also wobble.

Monsieur Bouguereau pauses before answering. Since the interview began, it’s the first time he’s been at a loss for words. Finally, he shrugs. “Monsieur Sargent paints beautifully. And he’s set on making his vocation with portraits of the wealthy. His success is guaranteed.”

“I plan on emulating my brother.”

As Monsieur Bouguereau’s eyes light on my copy of John’s portrait of Louise Burkhardt, he sighs. “Whereas all of the academy’s female students leave here with skills sufficient to earn a living, I caution their expectation toward that goal for one simple reason: they’re rarely paid as well as men.”

He scans the large studio beyond our alcove. Its students, all women, work studiously in oils. Finally, he points to one, perhaps a few years younger than me, whose brush puts the finishing touches on a large modern painting. It depicts several boys: street urchins of varying ages. Most

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wear tradesmen's smocks. Clustered on a dusty backstreet, they examine a whistle held by the oldest boy, but their faces reflect disbelief in his tall tale about it. Though the painting is unfinished, the boys' faces are as timeless as Hals' *Yonker Ramp* or one of Canaletto's many gondoliers.

"Mademoiselle Marie Bashkirtseff knows better than to wait for the *beau monde* to seek her out and offer her commissions." Bouguereau explains. "Instead, she finds arresting faces wherever she goes and creates a story that draws the viewer to her subjects. If she's lucky, a collector will buy it. Or perhaps a museum with a discerning taste for modern subjects painted in the traditional style. Though her works are speculative and sales are few, painting is in her blood. Can you say the same?"

I look down so that he can't read my frustration. "Sir, I live to paint. But my goal is to earn a living. I can't deny that. Be they men or women, if the only students the academy accepted were those who paint as a hobby, I wouldn't imagine its reputation would be so stellar."

When I look up again, the painting of the huntsman's cottage is in Monsieur Bouguereau's hands. He's deep in thought.

I pray my honesty hasn't cost me one of the school's coveted openings.

Carolus-Duran was due to arrive at nine o'clock. As usual, he's late.

When his fiacre stops at John's doorstep, my brother, who has been anxiously pacing the floor, flings open the door and exclaims, "Enter please, monsieur."

While the men give each other hearty hugs, Duran's apology offers him an opportunity to mention that a noteworthy patron had invited him to join a club where John can only dream of being a member.

Seeing me in the hallway behind my brother, Duran frowns. At least he has the courtesy to tip his hat.

I curtsy, then make my way to his side. Smiling demurely, I say, "Let me take your cloak and hat, sir."

As he hands them to me, I allow my fingers to stroke his arm. In response to his quizzical leer, I ask, "Would you like a glass of port, sir?"

As if he isn't already tipsy enough as is.

"*Merci, mademoiselle.*" He takes the offer as an excuse to chuck me under my chin before following John up the stairwell to the studio.

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Even the adoration of a hunchback spinster is a stroke for a man with a boundless ego.

Carolus stands directly in front of the portrait, slowly sipping his glass of port. As his eyes scan it from top to bottom, John restlessly bides his time by kneading a ball of bread in his palm.

I, too, watch Duran. No matter where his eyes travel, inevitably, they return to the fallen strap. When they do, his eyes glisten. In one instance, his lips part to emit a speck of spittle.

It reminds me of Pierre’s mouth when anticipating our lovemaking. But seeing it now, I want to gag.

The portrait’s replica stands off in a corner. John hasn’t shrouded it.

Duran has already dismissed it with a wave of his hand. He’s too enthralled with what he knows John will finally settle on sending to the Salon:

The one with the fallen strap.

John can no longer stand the suspense. “Well, what do you think?”

Duran doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he tosses the burning butt of his cigar into the fireplace before returning to the task. “The likeness is true. Capturing her in profile celebrates her most outstanding feature: her nose. As for the dress: it’s simple and at the same time exquisite and makes the most of her marvelous figure.” He shrugs. “Considering her odd skin tone, you’ve done it justice. You’ve minimized it to her benefit.” A pause. Then: “Do you have a specific concern, John?”

My brother may consider the question innocent enough, whereas I see the trap Duran has set for him:

If John doesn’t mention the strap, Duran does not have to bring it up either.

From John’s quizzical look, the fallen strap doesn’t give him pause. To him, it’s already a foregone conclusion.

It’s left to me to ask: “The strap sits so low on her shoulder. Is it...too risqué?”

The question is not to assuage a guilty conscience but to create subterfuge: I wish to hide my complicity in indulging John’s decision.

Both men frown: John because he has never considered the question, and Duran because he’d hoped to never answer it.

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When John brought his portfolio into Duran’s atelier, those who were there remember it with awe. The sheer number of works presented by the boy, then merely seventeen, was prodigious. But it was the quality of the work that set it apart.

Carroll described Duran as humbled by what he saw—and that he was thrilled to accept John before any competing studios were given a chance.

Does Duran now rue that day?

Duran shaped John’s vision of his destiny in his six-year tutelage of my brother. At the same time, he taught John the skills needed to hone his technique; and he allowed John to serve as his apprentice on several significant projects.

I would even wager that Duran influenced the Salon’s judges in John’s favor. Why not? Touting such an exemplary student to the world draws others who aspire to John’s prestige to Duran’s atelier.

Until John’s meteoric rise, this proud man was considered the premiere portraitist amongst the Parisienne *chic* and any wealthy American seeking such a talent.

Does the mentor harbor any lingering resentment over the numerous commissions lost to his young protégé?

Does the memory of John’s winning challenge for Pozzi’s commission still burn hot?

Finally, the moment of truth...

Duran’s smile returns, broad as ever. Grandly, he declares: “You may send it to the Salon with confidence!”

With that, he pats my brother on the back and saunters out.

Duran has finally shown his true colors.

I would not have bet against his deceit.

CHAPTER 35

LATE MARCH - LONDON

“**Henry absolutely adores** your brother,” Henrietta Ruebell declares. “So much so that I’m afraid John has displaced me as our mutual friend’s one and only favorite.”

This bit of flippancy is delivered with a wry grin followed by a tilt of her face before she exhales yet another plume of smoke from the newly lit cigarette in its slim ebony holder. The haze hovers overhead like a genie released from its bottle, patiently awaiting to grant any wish uttered from its mistress’ mouth.

From the sparkle in her eyes, even she realizes that Henry’s greatest joy is holding court and that she is merely another vassal who hangs on his every word.

That is, everyone except John, who seems oblivious to Henry James’s pull.

We’re in the celebrated novelist’s home. As planned, John’s arrival in London just a few days ago coincided with my return from Ireland. The time away from my family has done me good. When I leave here, I’m to rejoin them in Nice. Then we’ll go to Paris for the Salon.

Even now, John is on tenterhooks. He can’t wait to hear the Salon’s crowd proclaim Amélie’s portrait a rousing success.

And I’ve no regrets for having done my best to assure he’s wrong.

“Despite Mr. James’s kindness, John’s innate shyness stops him from effusiveness,” I explain.

“Not to worry. That John’s flame glows so brightly—and that he is such a winsome soul despite this—is why Henry is attracted to him in the first place,” Henrietta assures me. “And John

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could not have a better ambassador while here in London. Henry knows everyone and is welcomed everywhere.” She sighs wryly. “I may have Henry’s ear, but John has his heart. I have no one to blame but myself. After all, I introduced them. I’ll console myself knowing John’s portrait of me has already won Henry’s approval.”

The painting—gouache and watercolour—is my new favorite. In it, Henrietta is sitting, but she leans forward with her sapphire-bejeweled fingers clasped in her lap. Her satin skirt is a paler shade than her dark teal jacket. Her beige blouse has a riot of flounces at the neck and on the cuffs. She sits in front of an elaborately painted gold screen that seems to mirror the embroidery in her cummerbund and the lighter strands in her wavy copper-toned hair. With every stroke, John has aptly captured her *joie de vivre*.

“Henry is waving us over,” Henrietta exclaims. Fluttering her fingers in response, she murmurs, “Be prepared for a cross-examination.”

I’m startled that anyone of such celebrity—especially an author whose books I cherish—would seek me out. Warily, I ask, “On what topic?”

“Why, anything he can use to convince your brother that he would be much happier in England!” She leans in and whispers, “John has already divulged your sway over him. Knowing this, Henry will do his best to make you his ally in this quest.”

My heart soars at the thought. Should John leave Paris for London, my visits with him would no longer leave me feeling like a trapped animal that equally dreads its cage and the vipers beyond it.

“Am I overwhelming him?” Henry nods toward John.

He’s left my brother in good hands, that of two Americans: the slightly built Philadelphian, Edwin Austin Abbey, and the baritone-voiced actor from New Jersey, Lawrence Barrett. Their animated chatter is boisterous enough that we can hear Edwin extend John an invitation to a party at Lawrence’s new studio.

Henry waits until we’re comfortably ensconced on a settee in the nook beyond his grand salon before broaching the question. His sharp gaze seems to read me like an open book—one I am sure he’d never consider writing unless he deduced the turmoil that has darkened my heart.

“Though John is shy and may not show it, I’m sure he’s flattered,” I insist.

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“His character is charmingly naïf,” Henry declares. “I mean that as a compliment. I take great interest in him. In fact, I’m desirous of witnessing his future. He is intelligent *en diable*. He easily finds the beauty that resides in exceeding fineness. Had he been a character in one of my novels, I couldn’t have written him a better life than the one he leads now.” With a raised brow, he adds, “It is almost as if I have manifested him.”

“Sorry, but Mother claims that honor,” I reply.

He roars with laughter. “Then maybe I’ll make her a character instead.”

“She’d probably love that,” I concede.

“One must be careful what one wishes for, lest it comes true,” he warns.

“Mother is anything but careful,” I mutter. To change the subject, I add, “John mentioned that Mademoiselle Ruebell took you and Isa Boit by his studio.”

“Etta guessed rightly that I’d be in John’s thrall.” Henry sighs grandly. “His portraits have both clarity and mystery. The painting of the Boit girls—exquisite! John tells stories with his paintbrush. He has developed a way of making his subjects seem both close and distant. They are together, but they detach themselves and live a personal life. Your brother has a high talent, a charming nature, and is civilized to his fingertips. Not spoiled—but...possibly spoilable?”

Ah. So, Henry likes him in that way...

And asks about it so casually.

Well, John could do worse. I shrug. “Who isn’t?”

Henry chortles so vehemently that heads turn. For once, I don’t care.

Neither does he, but unlike me, he’s used to admiring glances.

Henry adds: “The best of his work seems to me to have in it something exquisite.”

To gauge if John rightly guessed his new friend’s opinion, I ask: “I take it he showed you the Gautreau commission?”

Henry shrugs. “Truthfully, I only half-liked it.”

“He thought as much,” I divulge.

Henry grimaces. “Does he hate me awfully for it?”

“How could he, when he has also expressed doubts about the work?”

I don’t divulge that the fallen strap has given John new confidence in the painting. I’d much rather have Henry share my opinion of it.

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“I like him so much that—and this is a rare thing for me—I don’t attempt to judge him,” Henry admits.

“True friendship is built on candor,” I point out.

This time, when Henry scrutinizes me, I meet his gaze. If we, too, are to be friends, I can’t be afraid of what he may think of me.

Finally, he smiles. “I see now why he claims you’re his compass.”

It’s my turn to chuckle. “I only wish that were so. John has no qualms blazing his own path despite what others may think.”

“If his path leads him here, he’ll go much further.”

“You may be right, but John will never leave Paris. His imminent success with Madame Gautreau’s painting will seal his future there.”

Apparently, my frown gives away my feelings on the matter because Henry declares: “Ah. Well, then, we shall be co-conspirators. You see, I’m giving him a push to the best of my ability. Emily, John has got it all—and so much more than Paris can give him. He can apply it here. I’ll see to that.”

He then tells me what he and John have been up to. Already they have attended the showing of Ned Burne-Jones’s painting, *King Cophetua, and the Beggar Maid*, at the Grosvenor Gallery, as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds’ exhibition at the Royal Academy. Tomorrow there will be another event for Reynolds at the Grosvenor. Then later that evening, Henry is hosting a dinner in John’s honor at the Reform Club. He has also arranged visits to the studios of various other artists—ten in all!

In between this mad agenda, Henry and my brother will go to the theatre, attend numerous salons, and so on and so forth...

From what I hear, Henry won’t give John a moment to doubt that the decision to live in London is preordained.

I laugh merrily at our host’s audacity. When he holds out his hand, I shake it, sealing our pact.

“Good,” Henry exclaims. “I welcome you to stay as long as you wish. Take your leave when John does. The more encouragement he gets, the better.”

“But...I am due to go back to Nice in the morning.”

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“I’m hosting you. I know Mrs. Sargent will understand—and revel at the thought.” He winks slyly.

He has yet to meet Mother, yet already he knows her; that is, he knows her type of American expatriate.

I have a glimmer of hope that his plan may work.

Be it at the Salon or in some other time or place, I so abhor the thought of running into the Gautreaus or Pozzi that the other side of the Earth would not be far enough away.

CHAPTER 36

PARIS

John and I have returned from London in high spirits.

So much so that after he has paid our carriage driver for carrying our luggage across the threshold of Boulevard Berthier, he says, “Why go on to Nice? Why not just stay here until after the Salon?”

The question brings me crashing down to earth.

How can he ask that of me? Can’t he sense my loathing at the thought of crossing paths with those who have hurt me?

If so, he ignores my feelings because he needs me at his side.

Ah well, it’s no longer reason enough for me.

“No,” I say firmly. “Tomorrow, I leave for Nice.”

“At the very least, come with me to Frédéric Spitzer’s reception,” John begs. “He’s unveiling a plethora of newly found antiquities, including a few new coats of armor. If we leave now, we’ll catch the crowd at its thickest. All of Paris is salivating to see his new finds.”

All of Paris.

Then most certainly, Amélie will be there.

“Thank you, but no. It’s been a long journey. And... I shan’t wait up.”

I honestly believe John is deaf to the anguish in my voice until he grasps my hand. Holding it against his cheek, he whispers, “Sweet Emmy, will you always be this sad?”

I see it in his eyes:

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Worry. Despair. Concern.

Love.

For me.

“Please bear with me, Johnny. A heart takes time to heal.” Gently, I break away. “Tomorrow, you deliver the painting to the Salon—even more reason that tonight you should go to the party and enjoy yourself with complete confidence that you’ve done your best.”

“Thank you for understanding.” John kisses me and then heads to his bedroom to change.

At that moment, I realize that he’ll never comprehend the depth of my pain.

Loud voices outside my window awaken me.

I stumble from my bed and peek out. A carriage sits in front of John’s house: not a hired cab but the one owned by the Gautreaus.

John steps down. He’s followed by someone:

Pierre.

I stifle a gasp.

My brother then holds out his hand to help someone step out of the carriage: Madame Avegno. She turns back, beckoning another to follow suit.

Amélie’s head appears. She holds out her hand. John takes it, allowing her to exit as daintily as one can in a tight gown.

At that moment, I realize Pierre is looking up at my window. Horrified, I take a step back. To my dismay, the curtain’s lazy wave marks my departure.

Why didn’t John warn them that I was here?

The answer is unequivocal: my presence is of no consequence.

Good. Yet again, his obliviousness works in my favor.

With great speed, I dress.

John and his guests are in the studio.

By the time I make it up the stairwell, he has just poured four snifters of port from the liquor cart and is making his way to Amélie and her mother with theirs.

“Ah, we have guests!” Upon hearing my cheery greeting, everyone freezes, including my brother.

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Finally, John says, “The Gautreaus were also at Frédéric’s soirée. As it turns out, so were reporters from both *Perdican* and *L’Illustration*. They were keen to ask about Amélie’s portrait.” My brother’s casual explanation comes from a face as blank as an unpainted canvas.

“Of course, they were,” I reply. Taking the other two glasses, I walk to Pierre first and hold one out to him. “Monsieur?”

He nods but says nothing. In the mere moment that he takes the glass, our fingers touch.

Our eyes meet. Even if I’d been pricked by a thorn, I can’t withdraw my hand any quicker.

The desolation I see in his eyes is cold comfort to me. Any remorse he feels, any loss that leaves him bereft, any memories he harbors of our time together mean nothing to me now.

He made his choice. To his detriment, I’ve now made mine.

“Perhaps I should have kept mum, but why not tease the critics about it?” Amélie smirks. “I hinted—merely that, mind you—that it will make its debut at the Salon.”

I coo, “Why, of course, you did.” I hand John the other snifter and then pour a glass for myself. Raising it, I exclaim, “Don’t keep them in suspense, John. Unveil Madame Gautreau’s portrait in its finality so that we may toast to its great success.”

Already silly with wine and the sort of high spirits that come with having been offered anticipatory congratulations the whole night long, John nods and laughs as he makes his way over to the shrouded canvas.

Will Amélie and Pierre be as blind as John to its audaciousness?

I pray so. Otherwise, my plan will be stopped in its tracks.

The portrait’s curtains fly open, exposing John’s ideal of Amélie in all her glory.

The figure’s slim waist and voluptuous breasts look real. It’s as if she was standing in front of a full-length mirror. The renowned profile that has already graced numerous illustrations is so lifelike that we could be looking at her twin.

And yet, no one says anything about the strap.

With a sidelong glance, I take note of Pierre’s reaction. His eyes sweep over the massive canvas once before freezing on the shoulder with the fallen chain. A frown purses his lips.

Madame Avegno is also perplexed. She turns to Amélie to gauge her reaction.

Amélie is utterly entranced.

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With a deep sigh, she floats over to it. Though her hand flies up, to John's relief, she stops short of touching it. For an eon, she stands there, staring at her ideal self.

Finally, she says: "It is me. . . . *It is me!* My beauty, my vision—*my attitude.*"

Taking her cue from her daughter, Madame Avegno sings out, "Bravo, Monsieur Sargent! A masterpiece indeed."

Mutely, Pierre observes her reaction. I recognize his silence as caution. In time though, instead of joining in, he says, "Amélie, about the placement of the strap—"

"Scandalously alluring," I murmur. "Isn't that what Doctor Pozzi said?"

A coy smile rises on Amélie's lips. She remembers this too.

But when she sees Pierre's dismay, she glares at me.

"He has seen it painted this way?" Pierre asks.

"No... *No*. Not at all." John's stuttered assurance is rife with panic. "It is a realistic rendition of the gown when Amélie takes that stance. The decision was made with...with Amélie's blessing, of course." His eyes plead with her to support this point.

My God—this is how much John believes in the portrait's imminent success!

Ever the gambler, my brother doesn't realize I've raised the stakes; that, for once, he may have been outplayed—by me.

Will I win my wager?

Pierre waits for his wife's confirmation.

Feigning indignation, Amélie proclaims: "Of course, Monsieur Sargent speaks the truth! What does it matter if the silly chain slipped down a bit? Those who look at the painting will be...they will be intrigued."

Pierre stares at her. At this point, only he—the man who deserted me in my most significant time of need—can trump my play and send me out of this game of spite.

Finally, Pierre shrugs. "It is your painting, Amélie, and therefore your decision."

She rewards his obedience with a peck on the cheek.

She is too busy admiring her image to see that Pierre now looks at me. He smiles, satisfied.

He must think my presence is proof of my forgiveness.

The fool. He held my faith in his hands—and betrayed me. He doesn't realize I've now done the same to her.

To him.

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I know I should feel victorious. Instead, I feel numb.

How quickly the heat of emotion is extinguished when buried under an ice cap of revenge.

John's guests don't stay long. When the door has shut behind them, he sighs, relieved.

"I'm proud of you, Emily, for facing them and...forgiving them."

I cannot believe my ears.

Honestly, is that what he thinks?

I want to curse him for bringing them here! His abode is forever sullied for me.

Instead, I close my eyes, calm in the realization that I feel no shame for orchestrating something that may also sully his reputation.

John had ample opportunities to reconsider its placement. And yet, at each turn, he held firm to his choice. Although his vision of what catches the viewer's eye is clear, he is obviously blind to society's edicts on a scandal.

Very calmly, I say: "As much as I hate them, the Gautreaus have served their purpose."

John nods absently while he reads a paper he has taken from his pocket. His thoughts have already moved on.

As he searches the dresser for a fountain pen, I'm annoyed enough to walk over to see what he's doing. He's filling out the Salon submission form.

But before he can write in the name of the painting, I say, "A thought. Wouldn't it be more tantalizing to the Salon's crowds if you left the portrait unnamed? As if you're playing a game with them."

Surprised, John snickers. "If so, it's one in which most, if not all, know the answer. Amélie is recognized by everyone everywhere."

"Isn't that the point? The Parisian *chic* will feel even more secure in their social standing for having known—*without being told*. And those who do not know her are of no importance." My explanation, though cold, is deliberately devoid of malice.

John nods hesitantly. But a moment later, chuckling, he fills in the line:

*Portrait de Mme ****

CHAPTER 37

APRIL 30, THE PARIS SALON

The thick boisterous crowd makes its way down the Champs-Élysées, excited to peruse the new artistic gems awaiting them at the Palais de l'Industrie.

Like a triumphant Bonaparte hoping to claim his greatest victory, John enters the building flanked by his army: Mother, Father, Violet, Ralph, and me.

Only last night, Ralph arrived from his parent's home in Venice, whereas Father, Mother, and Vi came from Nice.

None have yet seen Amélie's finished portrait.

Thankfully, John hasn't mentioned the painting's fallen strap in front of Mother. Any reticence will reinvigorate his anxiety over his decision to paint it that way. I even know how she might couch it: meekly and prefaced with "Have you considered..." or "But perhaps..." or even "My sensibilities invariably prove true in issues such as these...."

It is much better for the family to see the completed painting alongside the frenzied masses who jostle us as we enter its gallery. That way, Mother's role is consolation instead of counsel.

The Palais' great halls reverberate with conversations punctuated by the question, "*Où est le portrait Gautreau?*" ("Where is the Gautreau portrait?"), which is immediately answered with "Oh! *Allez voir ça.*" ("Oh—go see that.")

As we get closer to the painting's hall—Salle Trente-Trois—we scan the faces of those moving away from it for any indication of its reception. John's mouth drops from a triumphant

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grin to an anxious frown when the compliments he's overheard from two artists ("Superb in its style..." and "Magnificent. Daring. ...") are followed by criticism coming from a clique of socialites ("What a horror!..." and "She looks decomposed!")

The mob's derision is most raucous when we're directly in front of the portrait. Paul Helleu is already there, as are some art critics. Their grave faces reflect what they hear. One of the journalists has likened Amélie to a cadaver. Whereas I don't disagree, for John's sake, I'm heartened when I hear Paul retort, "When this portrait is touted as a masterpiece by the world, you'll eat your words."

Even if that were the case, there would be no way to change the memories of the thousands in attendance. Nor will it be so simple to patch over the gossip passed to others.

I look around for John. Despite his great height, I don't see him—

At first. But when someone closes one of the gallery's side doors, it exposes my brother, who stands behind it. From his stunned stare, I realize he's shaken to his core.

Ralph sees him too. "Poor Scamps! He's being vilified. Emily, stay here with the rest of your clan. Paul and I are taking John to Ledoyens for an early lunch."

"We'll remind him that, in art, time is the truest critic," Paul assures me.

John's friends have just made their way to his side and cajoled him out the side door when Amélie sweeps into the room. Pierre and Madame Avegno are not far behind. They arrive in time to hear one *Parisienne* doyenne exclaim, "Look—she forgot her chemise!"

Another shudders, then loudly utters, "I am torn between calling this figure 'cadavarique' or clownesque." A third lady smirks, "Since each is apt, why not settle for both? I would add to it 'detestable' and 'monstrous.'"

Hearing them, Amélie's celebrated complexion pales to a hue whiter than any amount of her signature powder can make it.

At least her reaction isn't as dire as her mother's, who passes out.

Luckily, Pierre is there to catch her.

I wonder: if Amélie had followed suit, which of the two women would he have felt worthy of saving from the oblivious crowd's roaming feet?

Not surprisingly, Amélie shows no concern for the one who bore her. Instead, she shoves her way out of the gallery, leaving her entourage of two to fend for themselves.

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No matter. For those who only know her by name or sight, the impression is now cast in stone. And for the many victims of Amélie's callous slights, what they have not dared say to her face can now be said of her portrait.

In the worst possible way, Amélie accomplished her goal: to be remembered.

Pierre looks around helplessly. When his eyes catch mine, I shrug. His mouth opens, but he stays silent. What can he say? Since learning of my butchery at his wife's behest, his actions have spoken for him. He accepts my triumphant smile with a resigned nod.

Then, heaving his comatose mother-in-law into his arms, he walks out.

Not surprising, Mother is just as upset. "What was John thinking?"

I shrug. "It's a *succés de scandal*—all the rage these days."

Mother glares back. "No one wants to be ridiculed! She's notorious for the wrong reason."

"If you're referring to the strap, she approved its placement," I retort. "It wasn't even John's idea. Madame Gautreau thought it pleasing, as did her dearest friend, who attended many of her sittings and commented on its allure." As the memory of Pozzi, tantalized by Amélie's fallen strap at the opera, comes to mind, I purse my lips to swallow my grin.

"Ha—some friend!" Mother huffs. "Obviously, her *maman* didn't like it. There must be a way to modify it before more damage is done to their reputations. We must find John."

"Ralph suggests we give him room to lick his wounds," I counter. "He'll look after him. John will come back better composed by the afternoon."

Father sinks heavily onto his cane. "I don't think I can stand much more of these insults," he mutters. "I wish to leave now."

Vi frowns. "Shouldn't we stay, for John's sake?"

"No. Your father is right," Mother insists. "We'll see John later tonight, at dinner. Violet, help us to the curb while Emily summons a carriage. Afterward, she'll wait here for John." Turning to me, she adds, "He should know that I'm deeply disappointed with that *strap*."

Anxiously, she beckons for Violet's support as she nudges Father out of the gallery.

Mother's scolding is disingenuous. Had the crowd been cooing John's praises, she'd have been crowing with delight.

Unlike the other Salons, tonight there will be no celebration with family and friends. Whereas Mother enjoys sharing John's accolades, his failures are his own.

CHAPTER 38

John, Ralph, and I return from the Salon late enough in the evening that the family has eaten without us and retired early. Father is weary with concern, whereas Mother claims a headache.

Violet is also exhausted. Listening to Mother’s rants usually has that effect on us.

We’ve just tucked into a cold dinner that Cook has prepared when the front door is barraged by incessant knocking accompanied by Madame Avegno’s cries that John open it at once.

He runs to it, hoping that a crowd has not already congregated on the street, curious to hear her pleas.

The woman rushes in. Amélie, bathed in tears, is on her heels.

Pierre follows them but distances himself. When he sees me, he nods.

I turn away. I’m afraid he’ll interpret my silence as sympathy for them.

It’s anything but that! I’ll enjoy watching them beg.

“My daughter is lost!” Madame Avegno shrieks. “She will die of grief. You must take the painting away from the Salon. You must...you must *destroy it!*”

“I...I...I will do no such thing!” John sputters. “It is against all laws—be it the Salon’s or any true artist’s.”

“But all of Paris is laughing at her!” she screeches.

“Madame, I painted her exactly as she was dressed,” John insists. “Nothing could be said of the canvas worse than what’s been written in print regarding her public appearances.”

Amélie’s sobs have become wails. Her nights at the opera have given her a new vocation. This overwrought interpretation of grief is worthy of Aida’s death scene in Radamés’ arms.

John is taken aback enough to offer: “I will modify the strap so that it sits properly on her shoulder.”

The older woman harrumphs. “It is too late for that!”

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Stiffly, John growls, “It’s the best I can offer you, madame.”

As if a spigot has turned off, Amélie’s sobs stop instantly. Shrewdly, she replies, “No matter, *Maman*. After the Salon, the painting is ours, and we will do as we wish with it—including burning it.”

John’s face turns pale.

“But it is not ours to take. We have not paid for it yet,” Pierre reminds them.

Amélie gawks as if she’d been hit in the face with a bucket of cold water.

Madame Avegno snarls, “No one pays to be humiliated.”

“Nor will we.” Amélie huffs.

“So be it,” Pierre replies. He turns to John: “The painting is yours to do with as you please.”

John nods, relieved at this outcome.

Glaring openly at me, Amélie declares, “Husband, Monsieur Sargent has offended me! You must challenge him to a duel.”

Once again, the blood drains from John’s face.

Pierre murmurs, “Our wrongs to the Sargents are greater than this is to us.”

“How can you say that?” Madame Avegno shrieks. “What does that mean?”

Pierre says nothing.

Amélie knows: Pierre was never under John’s spell. He was under mine.

Furious, she storms out the door.

Madame Avegno stares at John. “What do you hold over him?” Without waiting for his reply, she runs after her daughter.

As Pierre passes me, our eyes meet. If a moment can speak for a lifetime, his will be filled with desolation.

He deserves no less.

I deserve so much more. But for now, this will do.

Ralph and I accompany John back to the Salon, only to return with the portrait to his studio, where he spends the evening repainting the fallen strap.

By the time he’s completed the task, the chain sits firmly on the subject’s shoulder. It is drawn too tightly to my eye as if meant to tether Amélie to her shame.

It does so supremely.

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Ironically, there is no counterpoint to the painting's sole focus now: Amélie's haughty profile.

"What will you do with it?" Ralph asks.

John shrugs. "Maybe the old crone is right, and I should burn it."

I know better. It's the best thing he's ever done. He can't admit it now. Someday he will.

Ralph and I stay until John finishes the task. As we leave, our cousin divulges his fear of how such a blow will affect my brother.

I'm silent on the issue. Though I was the catalyst of John's downfall, I'm free of remorse.

Why should I be burdened that way? Amélie certainly isn't for her actions against me.

By the following day, Mother has collected all the newspapers with the art critics' reviews.

The family gathers around the table to read them. Except for Mother's whimpers, we do so silently, then pass the paper in hand to the reader on our right.

In *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, Henry Houssaye describes Amélie's eyes as "microscopic," her mouth "imperceptible," her complexion as "biafard," the neck as "corded," and the arm that is shamed by the fallen strap is described as "unarticulated" and "the hand boned."

He then points out that the gown's bodice "does not hold the bust and seems to escape the contact of flesh."

Houssaye's one compliment: "The painter's talent is only found in the shimmering reflections of the black satin skirt."

But the most brutal slap comes when he chastises John for turning "a young woman, justly renowned for her beauty, into a sort of portrait-charge, a rape mixed with the bias of a loose execution and the praise given without measure."

As for *L'Illustration*, the same critic who had showered John with anticipatory congratulations at Monsieur Spitzer's party now called the viewing experience a "bitter disillusion" and bemoans John's vision of Amélie as "dry, rough, angular...." He also points out that her face is flat, her mouth is without shadow, and her profile is no more than a paper cutout. "Never had we seen such a downfall of an artist who seemed to give more than expectations."

Considering John's immersion in the study of various techniques, he must find this comment particularly insulting: "Two years ago, we were talking about Goya in connection with Mr.

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Sargent, who was returning from Spain: we do not know where he has gone since then, but it looks like he only looked at Japanese imagery.”

The review from *Art Amateur* is particularly vicious, declaring:

This portrait is simply offensive in its insolent ugliness and defiance of every rule of art....The drawing is terrible, the color atrocious, the artistic ideal low, the whole purpose of the picture being not an artistic and sensational ‘tour de force’ still within the limits of true art, as Sargent’s Salon pictures have hitherto been, but a willful exaggeration of every one of his vicious eccentricities, simply for the purpose of being talked about and provoking argument...

Admittedly, I enjoy *L’Artist’s* review, perhaps because it is a direct slap at Amélie, calling her the most interesting “of all the undressed women in the Salon this year” for “the indecency of her dress, which looks like it is about to fall off.”

Ironically, this final critique is the deepest cut of all:

It is positively dangerous to sit for Sargent. It’s taking your face in your hands.

Shaken, John closes his eyes.

No one dares to say a word until he opens them again. Finally, he murmurs, “I...I must get out of Paris for a time.”

“Come with me to Siena,” Ralph insists. “Afterward, we shall make our way to Seville and paint those marvelous tobacco girls.” Ralph’s commiseration is heartfelt. He readily accepts that no amount of the Curtis family money can buy John’s talent and drive.

John shrugs. “*Nous verrons.*”

“In three weeks’ time, you’re in London for the Vickers girls’ commission,” I remind him.

Ralph sighs. “If you go with him, keep him away from the Pre-Raphaelites. I fear it’s their influence that led to all of this.”

If only he knew the truth.

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Taking his leave, Ralph hugs my brother, shakes our stunned father's hand, gently kisses my forehead, then does the same to Mother's.

Violet throws herself at him like a Hindu widow onto her dead husband's funeral barge.

Like Ralph, she wishes she were anywhere but here.

Thankfully, Mother has the good sense to wait until our dear cousin has taken his leave before bemoaning: "If only you had not defaced Madame Gautreau's portrait."

"John did no such thing," I declare. "Time will bear that out. Until then, his place is in England."

Mother smiles. "I'm glad to hear you say so, dear. It relieves me of the pain of telling you that Académie Julian did not accept you."

I stare at her. "The letter arrived?"

"Yes, early this morning..." Noting my despair, she runs to the dustbin. "Fitzwilliam—I'd put it here to be burned...But now the bin is empty."

Father, dazed, murmurs, "Of course, it is, Mary." He points to the fireplace, where a constant blaze heats our rooms. As is his habit, he quickly disposes of unnecessary correspondence.

Had he not realized this was much more than that?

Mother knew.

I run to the fireplace. Dropping to my knees, I claw through the ashes. Amid the scraps that missed the blaze, my eye catches sight of the atelier's letterhead—

Only to discover that the rest of the letter is now hot ash.

I look up at Mother. Fervently, I ask, "Are you sure of the verdict?"

Mother blinks back her tears. "I know what it meant to you, Emily. I only opened it because I thought you'd want to know the response as soon as possible. But when I read it, all I could think of was saving you from such a hurtful rejection."

She glances at John, seeking his approval for her callous act.

As if that would give me solace. Up until yesterday, my brother had never known rejection.

John walks over to me. He holds out his hand to help me up. "I'd hoped my personal letter to Bouguereau would have encouraged his view of you as a worthy addition to the school."

I remember Monsieur Bouguereau's jibe about John's commissions of the wealthy. I then think of the instructor's admiration of Marie Bashkirtseff and her mission of documenting the lives

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of the poor in her art. My candid response—that I must earn a living from my paintings, no matter the subject—must have struck Monsieur Bouguereau as callous. It doesn't matter now. Even if I'd been accepted, my family could now ill afford my tuition.

As I rise, Mother's face eases into relief. No matter what the letter said, she saw no future for me other than her wish for my destiny.

John's eyes meet mine. He's ruined because of me.

I now realize that there is only one way I can make amends: Our parents must be my burden, not his.

John was my foil in my vengeance against Amélie. For ruining his career, I owe him that.

CHAPTER 39

APRIL 1887 - ENGLAND

“I now see why the villagers of Broadway consider us Americans insane!” I exclaim.

Henry James, Edward Simmons, and I sit in the wildly overgrown backyard of our friends, Frank and Lily Millet, with the rest of their happy rowdy guests

We’re celebrating the sale of John’s painting, which was, in fact, created in this magical high-walled garden. *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* debuted at the Academy in January. The Tate Museum then quickly acquired the piece at the behest of Sir Frederic Leighton, the Royal Academy’s president.

It’s taken Johnny two years to finally win over the British, who have been wary of his reputation as a “Frenchified” American painter. During this dark age, John coerced many friends to sit for him, including some here. He even painted Henry, but neither was pleased with the finished product. Or, as John lamented: “It’s impossible to do justice to a face that is all covered with beard, like a bear.”

Henry laughed uproariously at that.

Others commissioned portraits of family members or friends. In Albert Belleruche’s case, it was his mother, the renowned beauty Alice Milbank. Ironically, Mrs. Burckhardt and Louise sat jointly for a portrait. Although Mrs. Burckhardt’s hopes for John’s renewed ardor toward her daughter created an awkward situation, this time, John accepted payment.

He had no choice. He—and the Sargent family—desperately need the money.

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Watching my smile grow as my eyes dart around the yard, Henry retorts, “Admit it. You too see our little artist colony as a form of heaven.”

Chuckling, I counter, “Had I not known better, I would have assumed I’d stumbled into a *plein air* asylum.”

I point to my brother. John has stripped off his jacket, tie, and vest yet dons a top hat adorned with flowing flowering vines as he dances with the girls who posed for the painting: illustrator Fred Barnard’s daughters, nine-year-old Dolly; and Polly, thirteen. They also have flowers in their hair: sweet peas interwoven with yellow marigolds, red dahlias, lavender nosegays, and pink roses.

The Millets’ other guests include artists Edwin Abbey and Peter Harrison. The critic, Comyns Carr, who is also the director of the *avant-garde* Grosvenor Gallery, is here with his wife, Alice, a novelist, and her sister, the author and translator, Alma Strettell.

The other guests’ various activities—painting, sketching, lawn tennis, and sewing—cease when Alma takes over the piano that the men dragged onto the lawn and leads us in a rousing rendition of *Ye Shepherds Tell Me*. Proof that Peter is sweet on her, his deep base is the loudest of all our voices when our impromptu choir reaches the verse from which the painting takes its name:

*A wreath around her head she wore
Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose
And in her hand a crook she bore
And sweets her breath compose...*

John, whose voice always rises above everyone else’s, changed the lyrics to “Damnation, Silly, Silly, Pose,” which causes the best sort of joyous upheaval.

“Your mother would revel in such company!” Henry exclaims.

“You’re right,” I admit. “She worries that my solo jaunts to Scotland and England are for cultivating the peerage. This proves otherwise.”

In truth, I use these breaks from the family for painting. The hours I’ve spent at London’s National Gallery, copying the masters, are sheer bliss. Failure to get into an atelier hasn’t—and will not—stop me from doing what I love most.

Teasing Henry, I add: “Next time, you should invite her. But when you do, invite Vernon too. She’s always been a favorite of Mother’s.”

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He blanches. With Mother, Henry holds his condescension in check. This is for John's sake, not hers. As for Vernon, his feelings are mixed. "I know she is a dear friend to the Sargents, and whereas I found her novel, *Euphorion*, monstrously clever, I am a bit uncomfortable with her...her...."

"Outright adoration of you?" I suppress a grin.

Missing this jest, Henry nods solemnly. "Yes, exactly! To the point of dedicating her novel, *Miss Brown*, to me! Imagine my discomfort—especially after I read the damn thing!" Henry sighs. "I put off the task of personally acknowledging her for many months. When I did, I couldn't help but admonish her for the novel's...well, to put it bluntly, its basely erotic preoccupations."

Having already been apprised of Vernon's side of the issue, I feign ignorance: "And how did she respond?"

Henry rolls his eyes. "She declared that I have absolute social and personal insincerity." He dismisses the slight with a wave of his hand. "The friendship is now at an impasse."

"Not surprising," I concede.

I know John is fine with this. He also finds Vernon's argumentative manipulations just as trying, especially her attempts to interpret art—and John's art in particular—as a serious reflection of the artist's mind. By staying mute while smiling benignly, John leaves the impression that her opinions fall on deaf ears. I'm sure he hopes she'll find this infuriating enough to float out of the friendship.

She won't. Vernon is sweet, annoying, and obstinate. But above all else, she's loyal to John. He will just have to grin and bear it.

Having also met Vernon, Edward rolls his eyes. Then, turning to me, he says, "I assume you've heard Carolus Duran has begun classes for women painters?"

"No... I hadn't." As much as I despise John's mentor and would loathe taking lessons from him, it irks me that my brother has kept silent on this development. I imagine Duran's disdain for lady painters is offset by their more expensive tuition fees and any fawning adoration he will inevitably receive from them.

Edward frowns. My dear friend is not fooled by my sudden interest in the lawn tennis rally.

But before he can ask what has upset me, I hear John's voice behind us: "Edward, I want to hear about the hold Concameau has had on you these many years and what finally broke it to the point that you're now making your way back to America." He drops onto the bench at my side.

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“And I look forward to comparing notes with you on Spain,” Edward replies.

“We shall, tonight in fact,” my brother declares.

“From what John tells me, you’re just as well traveled as the Sargents,” Henry says. “I’m surprised London has never held you in its thrall.”

Edward shakes his head, laughing. “You’re proof that acceptance of Americans amongst the British only comes in the wake of one’s success. For the rest of us, London is a male: a great, gloomy being, sitting on his island, rough, unshaven, besmeared with cinders and smut, and glowering across at the courtesan, Paris, as she graciously smiles back at him with every wile.”

“Perhaps.” John shrugs. “But in my case, I found it difficult to be honest with Paris—”

All laugh, knowing too well how his realistic rendering of Madame Gautreau played out.

Encouraged by their chortles, John adds, “Or, for that matter, women. *They hate the truth.*”

I join the chorus of ladies who now hiss and boo my brother.

Nonplussed, Edward chides, “Perhaps that’s why you paint them so well.”

Chuckles and applause meet his observation.

Edward is right. Johnny’s paintings are beautiful lies. He depicts women how they want to be seen, obscuring the flaws that make them human.

Or cruel, like Amélie Gautreau.

I’m the only woman he will never lie to.

At least, as long as he never deduces my role in the scandal that caused his exile from Paris.

He’d never put the blame where it truly belongs: with Amélie.

“You’ve gotten from Paris all she has to give,” Henry reminds my brother. “It taught you how to paint so well that there’s nothing else you can learn from her, don’t you agree?”

John is obliged to nod.

“And London is all the better for the decision.” Henry raises his teacup. “A toast then. *Vive le Parisienne succès de scandale!*”

Glasses are raised as the toast is heartedly repeated.

“By the way, Henry Harper was here last week,” Henry divulges. “I convinced him to allow me to update the article I’d written on John. It’s to run again in his magazine this fall—just in time for John’s Newport commission of Elizabeth Marquand.” His eyes twinkle. “Its publication will coincide with your arrival to paint the wife of one of the richest men in America? And at a price grand enough to make the crossing worthwhile!”

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Edward's eyes widen.

"Go on, tell us, John," Comynes shouts.

John's face turns bright red. "Th...the... three thousand dollars," he stutters.

As our friends gasp, John insists, "I thought he'd say no! I had no desire to go abroad!"

To the artists amongst us, it's a feeble case. He enjoys our envy.

"Tell us, James: how will you modify the article?" Edward asks.

"I theorize whether geography plays a role in developing one's innate talent" — Henry nods toward John — "by questioning whether our mongrel friend here should even be considered an American artist."

John sputters, "You make it sound as if being American is...is some sort of *malady!*"

"Were that true, you're its tonic—at least, as far as England is concerned. Having been exiled from Paris to having a painting in the Tate in only *two years!*" Awed, Henry bows grandly. "If you keep painting the right people, I predict a knighthood in your future."

"I'd be hard-pressed to accept it," John says. "I'd have to give up my American citizenship."

"Your patriotism is misplaced. You've barely touched your mother country's shores." To prove he means what he says, Henry stands, then raises his cane to tap John on one shoulder, then the other: "I hereby knight you Sir John Sargent, Lord of the Mongrels."

As laughter fills the air, I notice something unusual about Henry's cane: its head is a bejeweled turtle.

I recognize it: Count Montesquiou brought it to Samuel's sitting.

Half a decade later, I still shudder at the thought of that vile man.

I tap the cane with my finger. "Quite unusual." I'm surprised my voice sounds so calm.

"For that very reason, it only sees the light of day when I'm with a crew like this," Henry admits. "It was a gift of thanks from one of the three Frenchmen John asked me to entertain—when was it? ...Oh yes! The summer before last—"

The year after the scandal.

Back then, John was still hoping that Paris would forgive him. Only last March had he given up that ghost. Last September, he signed the lease on a new studio on Tite Street close to where it intersects the Chelsea Embankment.

Its former occupant, James Whistler, hates John, who counters with courtesy. Like Mother, we've learned never to show our real feelings, especially to those who can do us harm.

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Henry continues: “One was a count, the other a doctor, and the third... Ah, yes, a French-German prince. He wasn’t half as interesting as the others. John made me promise to take the odd little count to visit Rosetti’s and Ned Burne-Jones’ studios. And he found a soulmate in Whistler.”

“I’ll bet he did,” I mutter. Not surprising, considering the renowned artist is also an egotist. Henry hasn’t noticed that the blood has left my face.

John has, and he frowns.

Suddenly, the Barnard girls swoop in on Henry and Edward, begging them to put on the floral crowns they’ve created, especially for the men.

Swiftly, I rise and walk away.

John is close enough to grab my arm just as I reach the garden gate. “You’re angry.”

“Of course!” I hiss. “You introduced Henry—and *all our friends*—to those horrid men!”

“I had no choice!” John retorts. “London is one of their playpens. Had I ignored their request for introductions, someone would have made them. Montesquiou, in particular, would have done what he could to ruin any chance I have to reinvent myself here.” John’s chin juts forward. “I showed them I landed well despite the Paris scandal by arranging for Henry to squire them around. For that, they now owe me.”

“Mark my words, Johnny: *nothing you do will ever be enough for him or Pozzi.*”

He winces because he knows I’m right.

I’m out the gate when John adds, “By the way, I received a letter from Carroll.”

Such conversational sleight of hand is John’s forte: replacing a distasteful topic with one more pleasant. He’s always suspected my feelings for Carroll were more profound than that of a mere friend.

Nonchalantly, I ask, “How is the old boy?”

“Very happy, it seems. So much so that he’s getting married. His fiancée’s name is Bertha Hall. He met her where he teaches.”

“A student?”

“No. Bertha modeled for him. Quite a pretty girl. Her portrait was well received.”

Ah, so there it is.

Was it only seven years ago I so innocently assumed Carroll would one day see me as just that: a pretty girl worth painting, worth loving?

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How naïve I was.

My only solace is that I realized it before making a fool of myself.

A Pyrrhic victory, considering the aftermath of my affair with Pierre.

John patters on: “Come September, when I sail again to America for the Marquand commission, I’ll meet up with them. In the meantime, I must bring a wedding gift... I plan on taking two of my Venetian watercolors. I’ll allow Carroll to choose the one that suits him best. Who knows? It may inspire him to finally make his way back to Europe. By now, he must be missing it terribly. He admits he makes more money by teaching than commissions. What a disappointment that must be....”

It strikes me that not once had I thought of Carroll as I laid in Pierre’s arms; or as I made love to him.

There is no way to compare the fantasy of love with the reality of being loved, even if the latter was only for a mere moment in time.

CHAPTER 40

1888 - ENGLAND

“How much longer must I sit here?” Violet’s pout is not without merit. For three straight days, she’s posed after breakfast while seated in a punt tethered to the dock of the millhouse. A book is laid open in her mittened hands. The chill is so great that John has allowed her to wear several jerseys under her bodice. She’s also wrapped her legs in a carpet under her billowing skirt. She wears a turquoise sketch hat the same color as her shawl. As windy as it is, I wonder how it stays on her head. Both accessories are summer attire and provide no warmth in the blustery chill.

Vi is posing for four of us: me, John, and two guests he has brought back to England with him: an artist, Dennis Miller Bunker, and Lucia Fairchild, the daughter of the U.S. Secretary of State.

For the time being, we live at Calcot Mill in Reading, just a half-hour train ride to London. John rented it for us in the spring after Father’s stroke.

I can’t pretend that the inevitable isn’t taking place: Father is dying.

So, why am I the only one willing to acknowledge this?

Mother has been doing her best to ignore the obvious: his sallow eyes, stalled speech, deafness, gray pallor, memory lapses, and the gasps accompanying each painful move. Instead, she plans our next European tour under the assumption that “your father will soon be feeling up to his old self again.”

Ironically, the aftermath of Father’s stroke resulted in the one thing Mother wants more than any other: it has brought John back to us.

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Father can meet his Maker knowing that John achieved his dream.

My brother's American trip was a tremendous success. Mrs. Marquand's sitting was just the beginning. While in Newport, Lucia's father, Charles, commissioned John to paint his second portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson. He also paid for one of Lucia's mother, Lily; and yet another of the family beauty: Lucia's older sister, Sally.

From Newport, John went to New York, where he completed six commissions, including two Vanderbilts. And then, in Boston, Henry's friend, the millionairess, Isabella Stewart Gardner, shepherded John to the opera, parties, receptions, and salons.

As Henry predicted, Belle is enthralled by John. He introduced them, but with this disclaimer: "Mrs. Jack—all of Boston calls her that—likes to claim that her people were Scottish kings. Of course, one can claim anything at all when one is rich as Croesus. Belle's not a woman; she's a locomotive—with a Pullman car attached! And, like most rich Americans, what she looks to tote home with her is art."

Hearing this, I gasped as much as laughed.

Upon their arrival in England, Dennis excitedly described John's solo exhibition in January at Boston's St. Botolph Club. There, twenty-two of his recent portraits were displayed, including that of Lucia's mother, one of Edward Boit's mother, and the painting of the Boit girls.

Of course, Belle Gardner's portrait was unveiled there too.

Apparently, her pose for it created quite a stir. *The Critic* called John's work "brilliant and suggestive" but then mocked Belle's painting as "a caricature. It reminds one of a Japanese doll hanging from a nail in the wall...."

Even now, John shrugs off the slight. "The only opinion that matters is that of Belle's, and she's proud of it—albeit, Mr. Jack has now forbidden her to display it outside their home."

"Yes, well, he heard one too many jibes about it at his men's club," Dennis admitted. "The pose was fairly provocative." As an acolyte of the grand dame, he rightly says no more about the incident.

"She insisted on it." John protested. "She encouraged me to — and I quote her — 'show her wickedness.'"

That Mrs. Gardner is still in constant contact with John speaks volumes about her adoration of him. Through her patronage and introductions, the commissions earned abroad caused Mother to exclaim, "John has made more money from it than what we've spent since moving to Europe."

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I don't find it surprising that Mother would equate her expenses to John's earnings: evidence that, in her mind, the investment of time and money in my brother was worth it.

Vi's plea has interrupted the lecture John is giving Lucia on how and where to use middle tints of vermilion and yellow in the clouds that fill the sky of her painting. Lucia looks just as annoyed at Vi's complaint as her mentor. Although there is two years difference between the girls—Vi is eighteen, whereas Lucia is only sixteen—they've grown thick as thieves in the few short months of their friendship.

John has also taken to Lucia. He's impressed by her serious demeanor, which belies her years, especially regarding art. She hangs on his every word and watches every paint stroke.

I credit her for recognizing the gift of having John as a friend and mentor.

Lucia reminds me of myself.

"Violet looks terribly tortured, John," Dennis insists. "And the weather is beastly. Considering how prone she is to rheumatic attacks, perhaps we should resume painting tomorrow?"

John sighs, exasperated. It's evident to everyone that Dennis is smitten with Violet. And while Father's decline has only heightened her obsession with finding a proper husband, Violet purposely ignores Dennis.

Frankly, I think he fits the bill as a suitor, more so because John thinks he's a great painter and will go far.

Finally, John mutters, "Perhaps you're right, Bunker."

Smiling triumphantly, Dennis moves to help Violet out of the punt. But as she takes his hand, her shawl sways to one side. "I say, Miss Violet—weren't you wearing that lovely little stick pin?" Dennis asks.

With a quick glance at her dress's bodice, Violet verifies his concern by bending down in the punt and frantically searching for it. Dennis leaps into it to do the same, only to cause the tiny boat to rock precariously.

John is oblivious to their dilemma. He's too busy scrutinizing Lucia's picture. She looks on anxiously until he murmurs, "*Très rassemblante.*"

She can't stop herself from hugging him.

Distraught at the pin's disappearance, Vi leaps onto the dock, leaving Dennis rocking in the skiff. To steady himself, his arms circle furiously with a speed that rivals the mill's waterwheel.

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Whispering frantically, the girls scurry off.

Perplexed by Violet's slight, Dennis follows my lead and packs up his paints and easel, opining, "The youngest Miss Sargent is awfully pretty, and so charming. What if I should fall in love with her? Dreadful thought, but I am sure to. I see it coming—"

I have no time for this comic tale of unrequited love. Instead, I must hurry to the house. My inclusion in these painting sessions comes with a price. Until dinner, I'll attempt to keep Father engaged by reading aloud to him: he, in one of the chairs facing his bedroom's fireplace, and I in the other. Between chapters of *Moby Dick*, I must take a sponge to him before dressing him for dinner. Afterward, instead of partaking in the piano recitals and glees that go on for hours after dinner, I'll lull him to sleep with more of Melville's gloomy tale.

Each morning, Mother fervidly glances out our new home's large picture window as she paces in front of it. Father sits at the window as well, but he is as still as a statue.

I ignore her. If she had her way, she would always have John at her side and Father at mine.

Mother's voice carries through the back stairwell as she argues with Cook over the chicken's preparation. The way the British season their dishes is too bland for her liking. She dares to berate the poor woman with the cruelest cut: "Even German food has more flavor."

The giggles I hear coming from the stairwell are those of Violet and Lucia returning from their secret errand. Their footsteps tell me they've passed my closed bedroom door. The room they share is the one just beyond Father's. Tiptoeing quickly, they haven't noticed that the door is opened just a crack.

I hear Violet say, "—stickpin came from a suitor...."

I hadn't known.

Could she mean Dennis? As concerned for it as he was, it would make sense...

The fireplace flue is too rusty to open, so I've cracked Father's window a bit. When a wisp of smoke wafts by, I realize the girls have leaned out Violet's window so that she can smoke.

They're discussing their recent mission. Apparently, they searched for the stickpin, scrutinizing every footstep from Colcot Mill to Russell House because Violet remembered having worn it there the night before. As it turns out, Lily Millet had found it.

As young women's conversations inevitably do, theirs turn to the subject of young men.

"Mr. Bunker is quite taken with you," Lucia ventures.

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“That means nothing to me,” Violet declares.

“Is it because his manner is very...French?”

Violet snickers. “If by that you mean he has my brother’s aesthetic tendencies, indeed, it’s the very reason I find him unsuitable. ... Well, that, and the fact he is too short, too slight, and that his eyes are too deep set. Worst yet, he has no money to speak of.”

“But he is Mrs. Jack’s dearest protégé,” Lucia points out. “Surely, she’ll become a great patroness to him, and others will follow suit. As with John, in time, this should make him very wealthy.”

“Dennis is no John. And besides, time is of the essence.” Violet’s cold assessment of our father’s predicament sends a shiver up my spine. “Not to worry. The stickpin is from a suitor who meets all the requirements I have in a husband.”

“Is he an artist?”

Violet laughs. “Francis Ormond doesn’t have to be anything. His family is quite prosperous. They own a cigar factory. They have homes in Switzerland, Paris, and Sanremo. I shall never have to worry about money again.”

“Your parents will be relieved.” Lucia sounds envious.

I can’t blame her. I am too.

“Yes...Mother will be perfectly fine with it...” Violet’s voice trails off as they shut the window.

Any doubt I had that my sister is unaware of Father’s predicament has just been laid to rest.

“Who is Francis Ormond?” I ask John.

He smokes beside the stream now that the evening’s frolics are over and Father snores soundly in his bed. The water rushes so quickly that the mill’s wheel is clacking along at a furious rate.

Still, John hears my question. He frowns. “Did Violet mention him to you?”

I shake my head. “I overheard her discussing him with Lucia. She’s quite smitten.”

“She met him last summer while you were in Scotland. She, Father, and Mother were staying at one of Ben del Castillo’s apartments in Sanremo. The Ormonds also own property there. Swiss-French. Quite well off.” John shrugs. “Mother feels it will be a poor match.”

So. Violet is wrong on that count. “Why is that?”

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John snorts mirthlessly. “If I were to guess, I would say that he has no artistic bent—or any ‘bent’ at all.”

“Violet’s criteria are somewhat different: that he’s wealthy enough to keep her in style.”

“There has to be more to it than that,” John counters.

“She also fears becoming... an old maid.” *She’s afraid of becoming me.*

“Yes, well... She said as much to Mother,” John admits.

I snicker. “Not a year goes by that I wish I wasn’t either.”

John says nothing. There is enough moonlight to see that my remark doesn’t even merit a look in my direction.

Hesitantly, I add, “Perhaps there’s something we aren’t seeing in the match that may make us favor it?”

“Doubtful. From what I’ve heard, he has every bad habit of the rich and none of the good ones.”

“But you’ve yet to meet him and determine this for yourself?”

“No. However, the right opportunity has presented itself. I’ll be exhibiting at Paris’ Universal Exposition in April of next year. The Ormonds are showcasing a new cigar wrapper or some similar contraption. I’ve promised Violet I’ll meet Francis and his family then. In return, she’s agreed to accompany me again stateside. We’ll be away for quite some time, perhaps the whole year.” He taps the ash from his cigar. “Maybe that will resolve the matter.”

We stand side by side silently, staring up at the stars for a while.

“John, about Father...Mother pretends he’s not dying. But you know it too, don’t you?”

John’s pain comes out in a groan. In time, he murmurs: “Emmy, this afternoon I took Mother to Wimborne Road Cemetery in Bournemouth. We picked out Father’s gravesite and...their tombstone.” He hangs his head. “Mother is ready to admit it now. I believe she’s a little...well...relieved.”

As for me, I can’t control my sobs. I see too many parallels between my father’s life and mine.

CHAPTER 41

JUNE 1891 - SANREMO, ITALY

Despite being kept a world apart for over two years with only intermittent chaperoned visits, Violet insists on marrying Francis. Having turned twenty-one years old in February, there is nothing we can do to stop her.

That first meeting John had with Francis in Paris shook my brother. (My God, so long ago! In fact, the same week Father died.) When John returned to us in England, he took me aside and bemoaned, “Ormond is unsuitable!”

“In what way?” I asked.

“In every way, it would seem.” John’s head shook vehemently. “He has worse wanderlust than Mother. He claims to have been everywhere but has done nothing of consequence. He’s educated, yet he has no trade or real intention of getting one.” John paced the floor. “Truth be told, he’s the worst kind of...*of fop*.”

I went cold. “What do you mean by that?”

“This will explain it.” He handed me a letter.

I recognized Ben’s handwriting. Though I’d started to read it, John was moved to summarize it: “Francis belongs to Ben’s clubs, both in Paris and Sanremo. The other members consider him disreputable. And around town, he’s known for his...*unorthodox private life*.” When he realized my incomprehension was sincere, he muttered, “Emily, by that, I mean he has certain *proclivities*—and he thinks nothing of letting others know about them.”

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“Ah. . . I see.” Vi’s disdain of Dennis Bunker’s “aesthetic manner” came to mind. Even if it’s something different, it’s vile enough to have John pacing the floor.

I remembered her frigid response to Lucia: *Time is of the essence.*

“You must tell her what you know!” I implored.

“I have,” John replied. “It did no good. You know how easily she can get carried away with her emotions. Emily, she’s determined to pitch herself headlong into this match!” John’s head shook, palsied by his anger. “In time, I’m afraid she will be horribly disappointed in him.”

“Not if he’s got money,” I muttered.

“How cold,” John retorted.

I shrugged but said nothing. We both know it’s true.

We’re now in Villa del Castillo—one of Ben’s many abodes. Before the betrothal is made public, John has insisted on coming to a financial agreement with the Ormonds. Or, as he puts it: “Since their perpetually unemployed son refuses any profession whatsoever, they must settle some substantial amount on Violet.”

“I assume she’s relieved that you insist on it.”

“She is—which I take as proof she isn’t completely blind to Francis’s faults.” John looks heavenward. “In any event, I’ll demand he vow to be a proper husband toward her. He can expect to be publicly caned if he makes her unhappy.” John once took boxing lessons to make a point with someone’s verbal slight. Only his pride was left unbruised.

If his issue with Francis merits fisticuffs, hopefully, the outcome will end better.

He now takes off, full of resolve.

Mother is upstairs with Vi, trying to convince my sister that the match is a mistake. When Vi shouts, “You want me to be an old maid too—” I’m struck by the fact that there is nothing anyone can say to change her mind.

The last thing she wants to be is me.

I’m left pacing the floor and praying that, for Vi’s sake, John drives a hard bargain.

When John returns from the Ormonds’ estate, he goes directly up to Violet’s room.

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Having been cast out, Mother comes downstairs wringing her hands, which only leaves me on tenterhooks. In time, John enters the parlor. With a sigh, he announces, “The settlement has been agreed upon.”

“Thank goodness!” Mother exclaims. “Were the terms—”

“Yes, they saw my point—albeit the money will have to be raised. Both the mother and the father—Marguerite and Louis—had hoped Vi would have a settling effect on him. But realizing she has no desire to change him—that, in fact, her complacency is why he is marrying her in the first place—the Ormonds will be selling their business and the house in Clarens. The funds will come out of that.” John shrugs. “At least I’ve convinced Violet to do it properly—to wait the two months it will take to arrange for all the usual *fiancailles* folderal. Before the wedding, we’ll take an apartment in Paris. Vi can shop for her dress and trousseau there, and our friends can meet Francis properly. Vi has promised me he’ll be on his best behavior.” John smirks at that thought. “I told her that you and Mother are to be included in that process and that there is a strict budget. No need to spend the whole of their first year’s allowance in one week.”

Hearing this, Mother gives a sigh of relief.

“Vi is writing Vernon now,” John continues. “She insists that, as her namesake will want to be there and at the wedding as well.”

“Do you think Vernon will see through him?” I ask.

“He’s utterly charming, so maybe not initially. I’m sure he’ll win her over with his tales of wanderlust. He plays up his hardships as a rough-and-tumble wayfarer. You’ll even believe him when he claims he got lost in the Sahara without water. No doubt Vernon will deem him a delightful creature and that it’s a love match.”

“Until he breaks Vi’s heart,” I counter. “Then he’ll face Vernon’s wrath as well as ours.”

“True.” John rubs the weariness from his eyes. “As for the date, the wedding will take place in Paris. The seventeenth of August.”

“Do the Ormonds insist on it being in a Catholic church?”

“Even they realize a papal dispensation is out of the question. They’ve agreed to my choice: Holy Trinity.” John shrugs. “As a consolation prize, I’ve agreed to sketch Marguerite.”

“The first recoupment on their settlement,” I retort.

“So, it will be.” John stands. “I’m completely fagged. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll nap before dinner.” He kisses Mother’s cheek, then mine, before heading upstairs.

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A minute later, I remember I never told John I'd received a package from Henry. Besides a letter recounting the latest gossip, he enclosed a copy of *Longman's Magazine*, which includes his latest story, *The Pupil*.

The plot involves a family of American expatriates, deceitful swindlers who connive a tutor to take on their brilliantly talented son at no pay. Although the tutor's affinity for the youth is great, and the boy worships him, the tutor turns down the parents' offer to take the boy as his own. The desperate child literally dies from a broken heart.

In hindsight, it might not be the most soothing read right now for John.

Or, for that matter, Mother.

Not that she'd recognize herself.

CHAPTER 42

1905, LONDON

“**The Kaiser was in last night** for a private showing. He could not stop praising the portrait.” William Rothenstein, whose gallery, Carfax & Co, has a solo exhibit of John’s works, is practically glowing as he relays this news to John and me. “As it turns out, he knows the subject, supposedly having met her at some French diplomatic function.”

William’s knowing smirk implies an intimacy between Amélie and the German emperor that I don’t doubt. “In fact, the Kaiser intimated that he’ll be reaching out to you to ask for its inclusion in an upcoming royal exhibition in Berlin,” he adds.

John shrugs and stays silent: his way of dealing with all distasteful issues.

William walks away, perplexed that my brother isn’t ecstatic over this news.

Why should John be pleased? He’d assumed he’d moved beyond Amélie’s reach.

As had I. In fact, I’d warned him not to include her portrait in the show.

John had hoped this exhibition would provide the perfect showcase for his *plein air* paintings and only reluctantly gave in to William’s entreaty that he include her damn portrait. The success of a recently published book of photogravures of John’s studio, the painting’s home since the Paris Salon debacle of ‘84, spurred Kaiser Wilhelm II’s request.

No longer considered scandalous, now those who had never seen it in the flesh are curious to scrutinize it up close. In that regard, John did Amélie a favor by softening her ghastly toilette.

For at least a month, I’ve been anticipating the letter that arrived in today’s post: pale blue, the color of Amélie’s face powder. Its scent is cloying and floral. Even before taking note of the address, Rue Jouffroy, I recognize the handwriting by its large letters created with loops and flourishes.

I place Amélie’s letter on John’s desk.

My brother waits until we've finished our lunch before handing it to me. "Read it."

I'm not at all surprised that Amélie's missive begins with pleasantries that ignore the altercation which changed both their lives, then shifts to excessive flattery before finally getting to the point—albeit in a way that complements her at the same time. She infers closeness with the Kaiser by calling him "such a dear." Amélie then quotes him as proclaiming the portrait "the most fascinating woman's likeness he has ever seen." She closes by admonishing my brother against any slight dishonoring of her request to lend the painting for the royal event.

John frowns. "Maybe she's right."

I know he doesn't really believe that. Instead, he's contemplating whether Germany has enough aristocrats seeking to immortalize their faces on canvas to justify the effort.

"Suddenly, after all these years, the painting that she and her mother begged you to destroy isn't scandalous? It doesn't make her hide her face in shame?" My voice shakes angrily. "Amélie couldn't care less of the time and trouble it would take you to prepare the painting for the exhibition. But she'll certainly take credit with the Kaiser for having made you bend to her will and accommodate him. Just as she'll tell the world, she was your model — your muse, your inspiration! — for the painting that curtailed your career, that caused your exile from Paris."

I don't dare add that the painting ruined my life. Only he can deny her. Therefore, only his pain matters.

I hold my breath, waiting to see if I've pricked a nerve.

Finally, John mutters, "My plans to go abroad precede her whims. That lays the matter to rest. I'll write her immediately that she should drop the matter."

I doubt Amélie will give up her cause so quickly. Like a phoenix, she seeks resurrection from beneath the ashes that scorched us all. But unlike Amélie, John has soared to greater heights. And I'll do everything I can to ensure he doesn't get singed again. At the same time, I'll do all I can to keep her buried alive.

CHAPTER 43

JANUARY 22, 1906 - LONDON

“*Bonte divine! The poultice*—it’s too hot!” Mother’s shriek rattles me so much that I drop the offending item back into the heavy bowl of warm water, causing it to splash on us.

“Who told you to scald me?” she chides.

“The doctor made it perfectly clear that your bronchitis will only worsen if the heat does not penetrate your lungs,” I insist.

“He...is...”—Mother sputters through a coughing fit—“a *fool*.”

“He called you the same,” I retort, “for insisting on going to the musicale while still ill.”

“If John were here, he’d make sure I was taken better care of,” she mutters.

“Well, he’s not,” I counter. “To both our dismay, I’m your nursemaid. And as such, I’m just following the doctor’s orders.”

She misses John terribly. It’s the only reason for her to be acting like a tyrant. Since September, he’s been traveling with Alma and Peter Harrison: first, to Switzerland, and now through Syria and Palestine, to garner ideas for his mural project with the Boston Library.

From what he writes, they’re having a grand time. His letters are filled with flowery phrases about undulating waves of desert sand, hot topaz skies, and fluttering white robes of the Arab herdsmen.

He chose his destination wisely. This vast corner of the world has no appeal to Mother. Whereas she will go anywhere Violet and her children travel—including the Ormond’s grand Tunisian estate—she prefers a palatial abode as opposed to a primitive one, preferably in a metropolitan city with a large contingent of expatriates.

In their company, John Singer Sargent’s mother reigns supreme.

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Ironically, for once in Mother's life, her illnesses—an infected ear at first, and then bronchitis—have not been figments of her imagination. And though she has written John about them and insists that he not worry, she knows full well he'll do exactly that.

Coughing ceaselessly now, she points to her dresser. “The pain... in my chest... *unbearable*. Laudanum, please—*now!*”

Beside the hot poultices, the doctor has left a small vial of the stuff to allay her discomfort. I fill a glass from the water pitcher. Then, after taking the laudanum from the drawer in her bed stand, I add a few drops from the vial's beaker before handing it to her, then put the vial back in the drawer.

Mother sips it down greedily. Her requests for such doses come more frequently. Having learned to live my life in throbbing pain, I'd wondered why she chose to withhold it from me all these years.

Watching her now, I realize it was a blessing in disguise. The one consolation to her decision is that it does put the patient in an immediate stupor. I would have hated to have spent a lifetime unaware of my surroundings.

On Mother, the medicine's calming effect is immediate. Her voice is softer and calmer as she murmurs, “My shawl—the blue one...hanging in my closet. Get it for me.”

I make my way there. Scanning the hangers, I notice the shawl has fallen on a heap of old suitcases. When I reach for it, one's latch snags a few threads. The ancient shawl is too fragile to withstand a quick tug. Sighing, I reach down to open it. But the suitcase is old, and it takes more than a flick of a thumb. When the finally opens, the case tumbles from its wobbly perch, spilling its contents.

Old photos fall out. I bend to retrieve them. In one, John, Ben and Vernon sit on the steps of a tall stairwell of the winter abode in Nice frequented by us and other expatriates: Maison Virello, in the Rue Grimaldi. The date written on the back of the photo, November 1866, bears this out. Johnny and the others were ten years old. I would have been nine.

I'm not in the photo. By then, I'd been bedridden for six years. A meeting with the doctors in London would take place the following summer, assuring my mother that I no longer needed to be strapped to a mattress at night; that in fact, the sooner I moved my muscles the better, before atrophy set in.

Their recommendation came too late.

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As I gather the photo and the other items that have scattered about the floor, I see a letter written in my father's memorable scrawl. Dated December 7, 1860, it's addressed to his brother, Winthrop.

It was never sent.

In fact, its seal was pried open.

Curious, I pull out the enclosed letter:

Dear Brother,

I hope this missive finds you in good health.

I discussed with Mary the financial circumstances which leave us no alternative but to sail home immediately. She finally agreed that her health and the children's would withstand the extremities of the passage and is open to accepting your generous offer of the funding for our voyage home. However, yesterday our dear little Emily met with an accident. Dropped by her nursemaid, she fell down the stairwell leading to our apartment and is now hanging between life and death...

Why had they never told me how my accident occurred?

I wipe away my angry tears. With letter in hand, I confront Mother. "My back broke—*when I was dropped down the stairwell.*"

Her eyes, closed, open slowly into narrow slits. "John... he told you ...what I did to you?"

"John knows that *you...*" I shake my head, incredulous. "*You...dropped me...?*"

Mother's eyes have closed again. A scowl has risen on her lips. Softly, she mutters, "He and I...It was our little secret." She tries to rouse herself, but she's too drowsy.

"*John saw what you did?*"

"He...was a bad boy. He was supposed to be napping. Had he only stayed in bed..." Mother tries to hold her head upright, but it keeps falling to one side.

The laudanum bottle is out of the drawer. The dropper is on the bed stand.

How much more of it did she take while I was in the closet?

"I warned him that he mustn't tell FitzWilliam that it was me who dropped you." Her voice is barely a whisper now. "Otherwise, we'd have to go back to America and Father would take

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away his paint box; and that...that he would have never allowed Johnny to...to fulfill his destiny as a great painter.” She sighs. “But John was worried you’d hate me—and him, too, for lying. I promised him that you wouldn’t remember unless he told you.” A faint smile rises on her lips. “He vowed... never to speak of it. He was always such... a good boy.”

A good boy...

In her eyes, nothing John does is wrong.

So long as he kept her secret.

Just as I’ve kept his.

“He is not who you think. John... he loves...” Even knowing his darkest secret—what he did to me—I can’t finish the sentence that would make her abhor him as much as she does me.

Hearing the hardness in my voice, Mother squints hard to focus. “You don’t think I know his is an aesthete? Of course I do! But I also know John would never let anything—not an indiscretion, not even *love*—stand in the way of his success.”

Not even love.

Not even his love for me.

She knows him so well.

I was the sacrifice. For her.

For him.

I hiss, “You believed in him, but you never believed in me.”

My accusations raise a mere shrug from her. “Why shouldn’t I believe in him? Even as a baby, Johnny’s first words were ‘*Strada rossa. Strada rossa.*’”

The words, Italian, translate to *red street*.

“Why?” I ask.

“We were in Florence at the time. He demanded that your nursemaid take him to Via Tornabuoni. He loved the color of...of its cobblestones. Even then, he had an artist’s eye.” Her voice fades as the potion surges through her. “Emmy, I could not afford to believe in you. Not even after you were accepted to the atelier.”

“You lied to me—about that? Why, Mother? *Why?*”

Her lids flutter before closing.

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I grab her by the shoulders and shake her with all my might. I must not let her fall asleep. Not yet. Not until she hears what I have to say to her. “Had I gone, you would have been proud of me! Maybe then you would have accepted me.”

“You would have left us.” She fights off drowsiness with smug anger. “We could not have...that.”

“‘We?’ You meant to say that Father felt that way too?”

At first, she doesn’t answer. But then, forcing her eyes open, she mutters, “Only after your...your disgraceful indiscretion.”

Shamed, I recoil. “How did you know...about that?”

Mother struggles to catch her breath. Gasping, she hisses, “Your brother was heartbroken over it. Imagine the scandal it would have caused! You—*the mistress of John’s patron*. We’d have all been ruined.” This effort at honesty seems to have exhausted her. Mother sinks down into her pillows. Her eyes shut, she still has the strength to whisper: “Pozzi saved you from yourself—”

“To think of that butcher’s vile act was some form of kindness—for me, or to save John’s reputation—is laughable! Had John known the truth, he would have stopped him! John would have...”

Only then do I realize that the rasping in her throat has stopped.

Her stare is lifeless.

I feel for her pulse. Nothing.

She can no longer lie to me.

She can no longer hurt me.

Very gently, I close the eyes that always looked past me; that never saw me as I am.

Such irony: Mother is still grinning.

By confessing to me, she tried to absolve herself of the guilt.

Worse yet, by telling me of her pact with John, she’d hoped to obliterate any real love I thought he had for me; that I’d now assume any devotion he shows me is merely driven by guilt.

It is time to test her theory.

I must send for John and Violet.

It took John a fortnight to secure passage on a steamer from the location of his abrupt departure: Jerusalem.

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Even in transit, John felt Mother's presence. Her letters, posted before his departure, were waiting for him at various ports of call.

As he requested, we waited on Mother's burial until he returned. While the memorial service took place in the chapel at St. James, John, Violet, and I were the only ones who stood graveside at her burial beside Father at the Wimborne Road Cemetery.

We now sit in front of John's solicitor, Ward Nelson, as he reads Mother's will, which states that "John's great talent" and Violet's marriage allows her to bequeath me what little is left in her and Father's trusts.

Neither John nor Violet are surprised.

I am, knowing how little she thought of me.

As we leave the cemetery, Violet bids John and me farewell with some marvelous news: "Francis and I are considering a lease in Carlyle Mansion—94 Cheyne Walk."

The address is just a few blocks beyond my abode and around the corner from John's. I'm glad to hear it. She and her children—now three girls and three boys—are the few joys in my life. I know John feels the same way.

As for Francis, we have no need to believe he'll be anything more than an intermittent visitor there. Only Violet still pretends their union is anything but *le mariage de raison*.

I have no doubt that John will be the fatherly presence her children remember.

He waits until her cab pulls away before declaring, "Emily dear, perhaps you should move in with me."

"I will do nothing of the kind!" I exclaim. "We would both find it irksome."

He can see by the look on my face that I mean what I say.

And, by the look on his, I know he's relieved that I've refused to take him up on his offer.

If what Mother said about John's role in my childhood accident is true, sharing his abode would only be a constant reminder of his guilt. He would feel it, as would I.

Eventually, we would grow to hate each other.

I would not want that.

The sinful oath four-year-old John made to our desperate mother was expunged when I encouraged him to ruin Amélie because of what she and Pozzi did to me. The painting's scandal cost him dearly.

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And though I was livid that John told Mother about Pozzi's evil deed, I can only assume he divulged it to her because of his anguish over my heartbreak. Therefore, I've chosen to forgive his indiscretion.

To Mother's credit, she held her tongue on the topic, albeit I'm sure there were occasions when she was tempted to throw it in my face. I guess I owe John for insisting on her discretion.

I would now say our slates have been wiped clean.

"At the very least, I insist that Mother's apartment be put solely in your name," John counters." Unless...you'd be uncomfortable living there."

"Not at all," I reply. "Yes, I'd greatly appreciate the leasehold."

It amuses me that John would think I'd be concerned about Mother haunting me.

I do believe in ghosts, but her deathbed confession will have served as her exorcism.

CHAPTER 44

1908 - PARIS

“Ah! A friendly face! Are you also boarding for Lyon?”

I look to see Daisy White standing beside my bench at the train station. John had painted her portrait many years ago—during that dark time: the Gautreau debacle.

Though her commission and Amélie’s coincided, the two women couldn’t be more different, either in life or on canvas. John had insisted Amélie wear that black velvet dress that clung to her every curve. In contrast, he chose a satin gown for Daisy, capturing every subtle white hue in the fitted bodice and voluminous folds. Amélie’s shoulders were bare, and her neckline plunged, whereas Daisy’s gown had satin sleeves trimmed in the same lace that embellished the modest plunge of her décolleté.

While John captured Amélie’s true personality in her haughty profile, Daisy, looking directly at the viewer, invites our admiration with her relaxed smile.

“A pleasant surprise indeed!” I’m touched by Daisy’s sweet kiss on my cheek.

A smile lights up her face. “Are you also headed to Cannes?”

“I’ll be changing trains there for Italy—Sanremo.”

Two years later, even without Mother, we Sargents are still gypsies, but with a difference: now Vi and her children act as John’s muses when he has the urge to travel from one scenic locale to another. I manage the logistics that keep our merry band on the road.

And because John finds the business side of art so irksome, I’ve striven to fill that gap too.

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Or, as our solicitor, Ward, so shockingly put it: “You are as much of a business partner to him as you are his closest confidant.”

I know I should have been flattered. Instead, it makes me melancholy.

In a few weeks, we’ll make our way to Val’d’Aosta, one of John’s treasured painting sanctuaries. A few friends will join us: the Barnards and the British artist and doctor, Henry Tonks.

“I imagine you’ll stay at Villa Ormond with Violet and her sweet little ones?” Daisy inquires. When I nod, she chuckles. “How many now?”

I roll my eyes. “Six, in seven years. The eldest is now sixteen, and the youngest is ten.”

Daisy laughs. “Ah! She’s been such a busy wife!”

Our friend is correct, but for all the wrong reasons. Francis’s mother dotes on her grandchildren. It’s Vi’s theory that each child is an insurance policy against the senior Madame Ormond’s contemplation to cut Francis’s inheritance because of his spendthrift tendencies.

“You’ll join me in my train car,” Daisy insists.

“But...surely you and Ambassador White prefer your privacy!”

Daisy chuckles. “Henry is not due until the day after tomorrow. And since I’ve just finished reading the only novel I brought, I’ve nothing to do but catch up on the latest gossip.” She snaps fingers at a passing porter, commanding him to take my trunks to her train car.

I murmur my thanks, then gather up my satchel and the notecards I’d been writing.

The porter hands me a magazine when we’re settled in the private car. It must have been left on the bench by a previous occupant. I recognize it: a two-year-old issue of *Les Arts de la vie*.

Since I’ve just finished reading my book—Henry’s latest, *Reviews and Views*—I offer it to Daisy. Delighted, she counters, “Then you must have this!” She hands me *Madame de Treymes*.

To be polite, I take it. I don’t have the heart to tell her I’ve already read it. Otherwise, she’ll feel the need to entertain me. I’ve got no gossip to give, and there’s only so much of it I can take.

To bide my time, I thumb through the magazine instead.

To my dismay, it contains an article entitled “Le Pave Rouge.”

I’d heard of it. Then again, who hadn’t? It is the odious Count Montesquiou’s twenty-page screed against my brother.

The article was published the year Mother died. At the time, the press ate up this feast of jealousy and spite, never questioning where such vitriol came from. Instead, each slight was a

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bonbon to be savored. Sadly, Montesquiou's jibes have always encouraged others to bare their claws at John. Even Arsène Alexandre, *Figaro's* art critic, snidely—and wrongly—implied that my brother's absence from that year's Paris Salon had to do with this rubbish as opposed to a dedicated son's mourning.

In John's presence, our friends avoided the subject at all costs. Their compassionate glances, an unconscious reflex, were stoically ignored by John.

One newspaper, *Gil Blas*, called it "the moment everybody is talking about in the artistic world." Other publications touted it as a battle between Montesquiou and my brother.

Back then, I ignored the article. Now, I read it.

War is an excellent metaphor for Montesquiou's viperous essay. The count bombards John with a full arsenal of pithy phrases and petty arguments. It was meant to be a book review by an English art critic, Alice Meynell. Sadly, she and her French publisher are also casualties in the count's vicious assault against John.

Even after pronouncing that "taste is a unique quality," the count then reiterates what he'd declared at the unveiling of Pozzi's painting: that John is "a great painter who has none."

The magazine includes a poem. Though ostensibly about Amélie, Montesquiou is given yet another opportunity to prick my brother with his poisonous fangs:

*Since she has pink tendrils, a nose that knows no limit,
The portrait by Sargent, the unicorn's profile,
And at night, she sleeps beneath the high four-poster
With a resounding pillow in Morocco leather,
In order to be warned in time, of a mauve hair
Just getting ready to come through, on her temple, and it is
saved.*

*Since she has the golden trowel, decorated with enamel
To coat her face, with exquisite workmanship...*

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Apparently, the count has finally stopped any pretense of a friendship with Madame Gautreau. It validates rumors that Pozzi is smitten with a new lover: Emma Fischhoff, the wife of a Parisian gallery owner, Eugène, whom John knows well.

Why else would the count feel free to spew such venom against Amélie?

A porter taps on the door but waits for Daisy's nod before entering. To her surprise and mine, his missive is not for Daisy but me.

My worried silence elicits a sigh from Daisy. "Don't leave me in suspense, dear."

"The train to Sanremo is canceled until tomorrow," I divulge.

"It frequently happens this time of year. You'll have no luck finding a hotel room this late. Not to worry. You'll stay with me." Closing her book, Daisy leans in. "You promised me gossip, so put down that paper and sing for your supper. Tell me, is it true your brother recommended Dennis Bunker for the mural in Whitelaw Reid's new abode on Madison Avenue and that he'd championed Edwin Abbey for that stunning masterpiece called...Ah, yes—*A Pavane!*—which hangs over Whitelaw's marvelous pink fireplace?...."

– CANNES –

I rise early so that I may paint before continuing my journey. The sun barely peeks out over Pointe Croisette. It sheds enough of its radiance to reflect the sky's azure brilliance on the glassy surface of Cannes' calm bay.

I'd hoped to find human figures to give the painting its focal point. But other than the few gulls scurrying beyond the tepid surf, only a few bathers are up at this early hour, strolling on its thin crescent of sand.

Finally, a viable subject comes my way. Despite the already warm morning sun, she, like me, is cloaked: I in black, her in white. One hand holds tight to the garment's hood, whereas I wear a broad-brimmed hat. Its sash is tied beneath my chin.

Knowing she'll soon pass me by, I quickly outline her profile.

In a moment, she's close enough for me to examine the contours of her face. At first, I don't recognize her. But when she turns toward the sea, the profile is unmistakable:

Amélie.

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Age has softened features that were once so sharp that they dared others to stare: the high cheekbones, the pointed chin.

I force my eyes back to my painting. When she stops beside it, panic wells within me.

Does she recognize me?

Warily, I stay still as her eyes sweep over me. She then declares, "It's passable, as the sea." Her tone is as grudging as her words are cruel, but her disinterested stare reveals no recognition.

I suppose it helps that my cape, fluttering in the breeze, cloaks the one feature she'd remember: my hump.

A quarter-century of anger roils through me. And yet, I keep my voice calm and my words lighthearted: "Madame, your opinion inspires me. Perhaps I shall move on to do, say, portraits." Smiling, I turn to scrutinize her. "Perhaps even yours? Yours is mesmerizing!"

Amélie is wary of my stare. And yet, she's intrigued enough to nod.

"Gaze out at the water so that I may do it justice," I suggest.

She shrugs but does my bidding, lifting her head proudly.

This allows me to continue where I left off.

Moved by my overwhelming emotions, my brush does quick work. "There! You see? You're the perfect muse."

She smirks at the compliment until she sees how, in a few strokes, I've rendered her familiarly, though not fondly. My sketch is a recreation of John's portrait of her—more so, a caricature. Amélie's nose is longer and more sharply pointed than her chin. True to her figure now, the caricature's cheeks curve almost to its jowls, and its gut sports a slight bulge.

As she gapes, I follow her eyes, but I already know what pains her most of all:

The fallen strap.

As John originally painted it, the chain has dropped onto her arm, exposing her breast: still plump, but now sagging so low that its nipple is almost level with her waist.

Seeing this, Amélie gasps. Angrily, she shrieks, "You were there? You saw the painting?"

I drop my cape so she can see the one feature she might recognize: my distorted back.

Shocked, her eyes move to my face. The hatred she finds there drains what little color is left that hasn't already been obliterated by her signature toilette: the chlorate of potash-lozenge.

"I know what you did to me!" I retort.

"You know?" Alarmed, Amélie reels back. "Then... *It was your brother—*"

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She had not realized until now John's duplicity with her portrait.

It thrills me to throw it in her face: "Yes. My brother. He did it—for me."

"He told you—what he did to you?" She stares, uncomprehending.

John did nothing *to* me. Why doesn't she understand what I'm saying?

"No! That cruel deed was *your* crime—and that of your lover, the butcher, Pozzi!" A tsunami of anger envelops me. "What would possess you to do such a thing?"

My tearful declaration only earns her disdain. The deep creases from her chin to her mouth contort with anger. "Did you think I would be cuckolded by a cripple?"

I never meant anything to her. In her eyes, I was nothing, pathetic.

No—she is the pathetic one.

"At Les Chênes, Pozzi was bored by you. Amusing a cripple with tales of your increasingly desperate whoring antics was a more engaging diversion." Pointedly, I look down below her waist.

She gasps. When I look up again, I know by her wretched stare that I've just confirmed what she suspected.

I am the first to notice the two women gawking at us. They can't hear our words between the sound of the cawing gulls and ebbing tide. But they're close enough to recognize her. And from their stares, it seems they see her as I do:

She is no longer the aloof beauty. She's a tortured harridan. A pale, haggard crone.

When Amélie finally realizes that we aren't alone, she freezes. Then, straightening her back, she lifts her head up and sets its angle as one she has practiced in the hope that it shows her profile advantageously and purses her lips into the haughty pout that was once part of her allure.

My God, how silly she looks now.

As if reading my mind, one of the women, the taller of the two, laughs heartily.

Horrified, Amélie scurries away.

Awed, the other woman murmurs, "The bellman at The Hotel Metropole said that *La Belle Gautreau* is residing there for the month. Was that actually her?"

Snickering, I ask, "Is it not obvious? Her beauty—so *ageless*."

The taller woman shrugs. "Truthfully, I barely recognized her!"

I laugh so hard that the women are encouraged to join in.

Rising above the jutting tide, our cackles cause Amélie's shoulders to flinch.

Had I ever doubted there was a God, I now know he exists.

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To make this point to Amélie, when I return to the Whites' abode, I tear out the magazine page with Montesquiou's cruel poem and tuck it into my purse.

When I reach the train station, anonymously, I send it to the hotel via courier, care of Madame Gautreau at the Hotel Metropole.

CHAPTER 45

December 23, 1911 - HÔTEL de CRILLON, PARIS

Outside my window, Place Vendôme is now a life-sized snow globe. Glittering crystals float down from Heaven. Drifting tides of flakes dance around the square's iconic column as if it's a Maypole.

I came here at John's behest to purchase a sixteenth-century religious painting entitled *El Greco* by the Spanish painter Domenikos Theotokopoulos. John had hoped to study it for the project currently consuming most of his time: religious murals commissioned by the Boston Library.

But upon hearing who wished to purchase it, the gallery owner, Eugène Fischhoff, made me wait two hours before seeing him and then insisted the painting wasn't for sale. I suppose he associates John with the man who, almost a decade ago, ran off with his wife, Emma:

Samuel Pozzi.

John will be upset: not because my time was wasted or because I've now missed the last train that would have allowed me to join the rest of the family in Nice. In his mind, I will have failed at my mission.

In retaliation to the potential buyer's capriciousness and the seller's misguided grudge, I booked myself into the hotel's largest suite. Sadly, even the sumptuous meal delivered to my room can't alleviate the aftertaste of Pozzi's latest intrusion in my life.

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While drinking my after-dinner coffee, I comb every inch of the newspapers the bellboy found: *Le Temps*, *Le Petite Parisian*, *Le Figaro*, catching up on the city's politics, its arts, and its ceaseless gossip.

Finally, I scan the death notices. Now that my age is beyond the mid-century mark, I've resigned myself to glance through it, especially those papers in towns where I once lived.

My eye catches the name *Gautreau*.

Pierre?...

Oh, God... No...

With a pounding heart, I force my eyes to focus on the announcement. As is the French custom, the deceased's loved ones are listed first, in order of importance. Alternately, relief and sadness swell within me when I find Pierre's: listed second, after that of someone named Olivier Jallu...

Amélie's name is third.

My eyes fall below the names of other relatives until this:

...have the honor to share the painful loss they have just experienced in the person of Madame Olivier Jallu, born Louise Emilie Virginie Gautreau....

Deceased, provided with the Sacraments of the Church on December 23, 1911, in her domicile, Rue de Verneul, No 43, in Paris, in her 33rd year.

Pray for Her!

*After the funeral, the Inhumation is to take place on December 28th at Paramé,
80 Rue Jouffroy, in Paris....*

My God! Louise was so young...

I think of the six-year-old girl dashing along the stream's banks after her runaway sailboat. Her adoration for her loving father was shown in tight hugs and unabashed kisses.

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Pierre's heart must be broken. Louise meant more to him than anything.
For her welfare, he sacrificed his love for me.

I move to my suitcase to find the one item I keep with me always, as a talisman: the painting of Pierre and Louise, rolled up in a wooden tube. I address the tube's label to Pierre, but I don't write my name as the sender.

I know Pierre will cherish it as much as I have all these years.

I call down to the lobby and ask that a taxi be secured to take me to Rue Jouffroy.

Pierre's swarthy butler answers my knock. Thankfully, he doesn't recognize me.

I ask that he give his master the tube only to be told that Monsieur and Madame Gautreau are at church, meeting with the priest regarding the funeral service. Hearing their names in the same sentence makes me even more adamant in declaring, "I only wish to leave this."

"If it is for madame, her residence is on the Rue de la Tour—"

Pierre and Amélie live apart?

For how long?

And yet, Pierre did not reach out to me.

Louise had long been grown and married. She was no longer the excuse to stay away.

I realize now I have no reason to hold onto the painting.

"No! This is for monsieur only." Thrusting the tube into his hand, I walk away, ignoring his entreaty that I leave a calling card.

CHAPTER 46

1915 - LONDON

“I’ve always...felt... that... food... is a... poor substitute for love.” Although Henry James’s sole sentence is spoken slowly and with great care, his stammered words frustrate him. Wearily, he places his spoon back onto his tray.

“I do, too,” I reply. I then pick up the spoon and place it back in his good hand—the one that wasn’t affected by his recent stroke. “But life depends on nourishment. So, why don’t we save the philosophical discussion for another day?”

Henry drops it again. Before I reach for it, he grasps my hand. Pressing it against his cheek, he mumbles: “I don’t... have many left. We both know that.”

When his gaze meets mine, I can’t stop the tears that well up in my eyes.

“If it makes you feel better, you can tell me that you love me,” he informs me. “But there is really no need. You’ve already shown me in so many ways.”

I nod because I can’t speak. My heart is too swollen with pain.

I’d be surprised if he lived beyond the next few months.

The first stroke was only a week ago. The second, just two days later, left Henry paralyzed on his left side. Luckily, I was with him.

His brain is still clear. But his speech is slow and sometimes muddled: a horror for one known for sentences that were as verbose as they were eloquent.

I’ve not left his side since then, working in shifts with Vi and Henry’s assistant, Miss Bosanquet. It’s the least I can do. Since the day Henry moved up the street, being his friend and

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confidant has been just as much solace for me as it's been for him. We are without blood attachment. And yet, I've come to appreciate him as one would a brother. Our easy alliance, built on like intellect and opinions, has allowed him to accept with ease my invitations to dinner; then, eventually, to play hostess to his events, as I do with John's.

I took great pride when he honestly proclaimed, "It seems to me that at this rate, it's you and John who give all my dinners."

Henry's adoration for John began as an unspeakable love. Was it requited? Who's to know? And at this point, what would it matter?

Through time and incident, their feelings have transposed into brotherly love. Intimacy—physical or emotional—has been replaced by a bond of unquestioned acceptance.

Except on one issue: John's stubborn silence on this horrendous Great War.

Henry has done his best to convince John that he should care about it and that our native country should do likewise. Henry once described this great evil event as having come "as by the leap of some awful monster out of his lair. He is upon all of us here before we have had time to turn round...It gives away everything one has believed in and lived for."

He has warned my brother that influential Americans—including John—shouldn't wait until someone near and dear to them is a casualty; that standing on the sidelines assures it will happen sooner than later.

One in our family has already fallen: Robert André-Michel, the husband of our niece, Rose-Marie—and the son of André Michel, the critic who sang John's praises for *El Jaleo*.

Isn't this reason enough for John?

To Henry's dismay and mine, apparently not.

Because of his great love for Britain, in its darkest time of need, Henry rallied to its side. Not only has he visited the wounded and cared for foreign refugees, but he also serves as the honorary president of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps.

I'm so proud of him. So is all of England.

His sigh is so long this time that it ends with a groan. "There is...still... so much I... want to do!"

I move his tray so that I may sit in the bed beside him. Henry burrows deep into my arms. Despite his heaving sobs and his stroke-afflicted words, I understand all he is mourning:

The books he'd hoped to write.

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The salons he will never attend.

The gossip he will never hear.

The friends he will leave behind.

I'm honored to count myself amongst them.

Upon this last, my wails join his. The reality of life is that this lament is one we must all eventually accept.

Finally, he sighs. "When does Alice get here?" She is his deceased brother William's wife. Upon Henry's incapacitation or death, she becomes the executor of his estate.

Wiping my tears, I whisper, "In three days."

"Please...my correspondence, there." He points to a closet. "We don't have...much...time. You must...burn..."

"But—"

It's not my place to do this...

"For me..." His gaze is steady. "William accepted my...disposition. But Alice...There are things she...cannot see."

Henry never has minced words, least of all in his writing. If the letters I've received from him are any indication—let alone the giggles and blushes from John when reading one of Henry's missives to him—be it in person or print, our friend lives to titillate.

To love someone is to protect their secrets.

So now, at Henry's behest, I open the closet. File cabinets cram every inch of it!

And so it begins:

I go through his papers, gauging the weight of their intimacy on posterity.

To save his energy and speech, I show each to him so that he may peruse it: not just the letters he's received but copies of those he's written.

If a letter is to be saved, he taps his little finger on his bedside table with the arm unaffected by the stroke. If it is tainted with salaciousness—if, in any way, it may tarnish his carefully crafted public persona—Henry taps his thumb instead so that I may toss it into the roaring fire.

When I come across any letter of John's or mine to him, he leaves it up to me to decide their fate. Mine are innocuous enough, as are the bulk of John's. I take the few I know my shy brother would prefer to keep.

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When I meet Alice, I'll hand her a bundle containing the many letters he wrote me so that she may decide their fate.

His archive is so vast! I know I won't complete the task before she comes. Still, I'll try my best. It will be my last act of love for Henry, to whom we Sargents owe so much.

I kiss his cheek before I leave.

CHAPTER 47

January 1916 - 31 Tite Street, London

“I think it’s time I offer Edward Robinson the portrait.”

John refers to the painting of Amélie. I only know this because he stands beside its easel that, like a skeleton, is now stripped of the body of work that it once held.

Ned and John have been friends for many years. Although he’s now the curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, they’d met when he was with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

The reason John is choosing now to part with the portrait is that he no longer fears she has any claim on it.

Amélie died last summer.

Supposedly, it was a sudden illness. But who’s to know for sure?

After her daughter’s death, I’m not surprised that Amélie spent her final years as a recluse. Madame Avegno had died the year before Louise. She did more than enable Amélie’s social climbing. She facilitated it in every way possible and lived vicariously through her daughter’s conquests.

Amélie was always vain, never endearing. If all the ridicule the portrait received proved anything, it was that her mother and her daughter were the only ones who made allowances for her.

Apparently, Pierre pitied her enough to permit her request to be buried in the Gautreau’s mausoleum, in Paramé.

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Amélie’s portrait has left John’s studio on only three occasions. The first was in 1905, when the Kaiser saw it at the Carfax Gallery. Upon seeing it there, the critic for *Athenaeum*’s proclaimed it “a masterpiece.”

How times have changed.

In 1911, it was part of an Italian art exhibition. Since February of last year, it has been on display at San Francisco’s Pan-Pacific International Exhibition, which ended in November.

“U-boats have gotten bolder with the sinking of the Lusitania,” John frets. “With this damned war an inevitability—and who knows for how long—I may rue chancing its return. It’s much better that it stays stateside.”

“If the Met is your choice, you’re right,” I reply. “Ned will be ecstatic, especially knowing the many museums have been salivating at the thought of owning it.”

John nods resignedly. “Not a year goes by that he doesn’t ask if I’m ready to sell.”

“Amélie will be in great company there.” Hearing me say her name, my brother winces.

Good. He should hate her as much as me.

“Would you care for me to arrange for a telegram?” I ask. I can’t wait to get rid of it. In its absence, the dark memories emitting from it no longer fog the studio.

“A letter will suffice.” He sets himself to the task.

Afterward, I see it on his desk. As is his habit, he’s left it to me to address and mail it. He claims my much more readable handwriting gives at least some hope that his letters reach their destinations.

Will he care if I read it? Doubtful. John’s subterfuge is just as adept on paper as it is in person:

Jan. 8, 1916

My Dear Ned,

Having given me the permission to communicate with the Museum when I have something that I think worthy of it makes me venture to suggest to you, rather than to the Trustees, a proposition for what you may think of it. My portrait of Madame Gautreau is with some other things I sent from here at the San

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Francisco Exhibition. And now that it is in America, I rather feel inclined to let it stay there, if a Museum should want it. I suppose it is the best thing I have done. I would let the Metropolitan Museum have it for \$1,000. Let me know your opinion. If Madame Gautreau should not stay in America, I think she had better come back here with the rest of my things.

Yrs. ever, JOHN S. SARGENT.

The best thing he has done...

Blackness clouds my vision. Through it, Amélie's face appears as it did in 1881, while in the salon where *Fumée d'ambre gris* was on display. Her mouth is pursed in that same snide smirk in which she proclaimed, "No wonder the painter covered her from head to toe. And yet, he saw beauty in that creature..."

That John will now grant her what she has always wanted—her name on everyone's lips—causes me to cackle insanely.

The noise draws John to my side. He sees the letter in my hand. Confounded, he exclaims: "I don't think he'll read it as a joke."

I calm myself enough to reply: "No, of course not. I was just envisioning the placard beside it." I hold up my hand and point to a far-off place on the wall. Then, as if reading it, I declare, "*Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau, nee Amélie.*"

John scowls. "In public, it has always been anonymous."

"Even so, from what you've written here, it could be interpreted that you're giving the Met carte blanche to call it what it wishes."

"I've done no such thing!"

"Then perhaps you should make it clearer to him." I hand John the pen.

He must see my point because he doesn't hesitate to write:

On account of the row I had with the lady years ago...the picture should not be called by her name.

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He leans back in the chair and closes his eyes, as if exhausted from the task of keeping her in her place of anonymity. In time, he murmurs, “After one’s death, sentiment, like anger, loses all value.”

I wish I felt the same way.

Afterward, I realize the price he’s given the museum is much less than what Pierre offered John those many years ago at Les Chênes: the commission, doubled, to be paid in advance.

John must feel no need for a premium despite all the pain it has caused us.

I suppose he’s right. The lessons learned from the incident have been invaluable.

CHAPTER 48

APRIL 14, 1925

“I’ve set aside all my pink hydrangeas for you, mum.” Winnie, the girl who runs one of King’s Road’s largest flower stands, reaches for the blooms from the bin behind her. Turning back around, she adds, “We’ll be displaying them at the Chelsea flower show this year. It’s his favorite, ain’t it? Your mister’s? He has good taste, that one.”

On more than one occasion, I’ve corrected her assumption: one she came to a year ago when John accompanied me here. The stand is not far from “The Avenue”: a collective of artist studios on Fulham Road, where John works on the large murals commissioned by the Boston Library. To my annoyance, his gentle teasing over the blossoms I chose that day made enough of an impression that she leaped to the conclusion that we are man and wife.

Winnie nods absently as she plucks the other blooms I’ve requested: pale blue anemones, dark blue poppies, deep lavender veronica, burgundy scabiosa, and finally, Queen Anne’s lace. She then lays out brown paper centering the flowers, then tying them up with thick string. Their colors will complement the dining room’s deep red damask wallpaper, a gift John purchased during one of his trips to Venice.

Suddenly, Count Montesquiou comes to mind. I remember Amélie complimenting him on the decor of his apartment—gray walls, gray furniture, even gray flowers...

As colorless as his poems.

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Years ago, while packing John's things for his move to London, I came across the book of Montesquiou's poetry, which he'd gifted John on the day we first met him. As much as I abhorred the man, I was curious to learn what ideals might be revealed through his writings.

One line stood out:

I am the sovereign of transitory things.

It sums up his smugness with such eloquence.

Admittedly, there is truth in it. Nothing that odious man championed was worth immortalizing.

I tossed the book in the rubbish bin.

Montesquiou is dead now. Surely, his cruelty earned him a place in hell, alongside Amélie and their beloved Pozzi.

Such memories prick my curiosity as to Pierre's fate. I'd heard from Paul Helleu that he had inherited part of the Avegnos' Louisiana plantation from Amélie's estate. Perhaps he is in America?

The moon would not be too far. His cowardice has muted my heart from any feelings for him.

Winnie's prattling breaks through this thick fog of memories: "My, my, you do enjoy your *suh-WAY*-rays, now don't you, Mrs. Sargent? Sometimes two in a week."

I wince at her pronunciation of *soirée*. "Mr. Sargent has many friends," I explain.

"You do too, I imagine." She hands the flowers to me. "So they last the week. I'd suggest putting them in a bucket of water afterward and leaving it in a cold cupboard overnight."

"It won't be necessary. As it turns out, Mr. Sargent and I leave immediately for America. We sail on the *Baltic* on the eighteenth."

I don't know why I need to mention this to her except that our "*suh-WAH-ray*" serves as a bon voyage party. Now that the Boston Library murals are finally completed, John and I are again headed there to supervise their installation.

Winnie's eyes grow as wide as saucers. "Blimey. America." Embarrassed that she has revealed her cockney roots, she covers her mouth with her free hand.

We all have things we wish to hide from the rest of the world. I'm not one to pass judgment on others.

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Unless they've wronged me.

So that she understands that I don't hold her history against her, I tip her an extra crown.

On my way home, I detour past John's Fulham Road studio. This morning, he was to supervise the packing of the murals. Though they were to be picked up by now and taken to the cargo ship, he may still be there.

To my surprise, a large lorry is parked in front of the studio. And oddly, despite being dressed in a suit, John sits on the sidewalk. He has shed his jacket, and his tie is loosened. His face is bright red. His eyes are closed.

John's friend, the landscape artist Adrian Stokes, frowns as he kneels beside him.

Several large crates have been angled against the studio wall. As I approach, two workmen—I assume hired to move the crates into the lorry—are shuffling their feet.

The lorry driver looks impatiently at his watch.

I run up to them. Hearing my footsteps, John's eyes open.

I kneel beside him. "What happened?"

"Just catching my breath," he mutters.

"The third man didn't show, so John and I helped crate the panels," Adrian adds.

"Did you also try to carry them out?" I ask John.

Instead of answering me, he waves away my concern. With a chuckle, he declares, "Now that the American things are done, I suppose I may die when I like."

From the look on Adrian's face, like me, he doesn't like John's joke.

Adrian suggests I taxi home with John so that he may rest before our dinner party.

When we're in the cab, John tries to offset my concern by asking about this evening's plans. "Nelson will be there, I hope?" he asks. John appreciates our friend's sly wit.

"Yes, and Henry too." Though we've known Henry Tonks since before the war, John appreciated his friendship even more while both were commissioned to paint Britain's soldiers on the Western Front.

I add, "The Barnard sisters are also free, as is Philip." Polly and Dolly Barnard, who, as little girls, posed for *Carnation*, *Lily*, *Lily*, *Rose* are now in their forties. Philip Steer, an artist, also lives in Carlyle Mansions, albeit down river from the Tite Street studio.

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“And sweet Fanny?” John asks.

“Yes, she looks forward to it.” Fanny Prothero is one of the Ladies Dining Society’s founders and the renowned historian’s widow. George. John has always appreciated her quiet intellect and candor.

He mutters, “We are widows and orphans, spinsters, and bachelors to the one.”

“Except for Alma and Peter Harrison,” I remind him. “They’re also coming.”

“Peter might as well be a bachelor,” John grumbles. “Poor Alma. By the way, don’t seat him near Polly.”

“Duly noted.”

While a guest at Ightham Mote, Peter began a flirtation with Elsie, the daughter who was the subject of a portrait by John, commissioned by her father, the railroad baron, General William Palmer. His wife, Queen, was Alma’s oldest and dearest friend.

After Queen died, Peter hastened his pursuit. Conquest was inevitable. The infatuation lasted several years. He broke Elsie’s heart by having an affair with her sister, Dorothy.

Peter’s tendency to stray from Alma’s side has not abated. His latest infatuation is Polly.

Alma has never mentioned these incidents. I know it shames her terribly. Or perhaps she worries that the knowledge will affect our relationship with Peter.

It would not have mattered to my brother. His great affection is for Alma. He doesn’t take Peter seriously as a close friend or painter.

Peter knows this. Out of spite, he once called John a “juggernaut” for his prodigious work.

John sneered when he heard that. “He’d much rather be fishing with his brother, Ginx.”

As always, we’ll be hosting our guests at my home. Were any of our friends to wonder about John’s sexuality, his portrait of Albert de Belleruche, now hanging prominently over John’s dining room mantel, would settle the matter. It was painted when Albert was still so incredibly beautiful—to the point of John’s delirious desire and undying devotion.

When Belleruche married in 1910, John was devastated. There was a time I thought that he would keep the painting shrouded forever, as one does for the dead.

I’m convinced the ghost of their love haunts that room.

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Our little bon voyage party is everything I'd hoped for: a satisfying meal, interesting conversation, and celebratory declarations about our future. With the Boston project complete, John looks forward to more travel with friends and family.

So do I.

In the role I play now—that of John's hostess—I have both eyes and one ear on my conversant, Fanny. The other ear is attuned to the cacophony of discussion swirling around the table.

John's voice, usually *sotto voce*, rises as he recounts to the Barnard sisters a letter he received two years ago. It came from Louise Burckhardt's sister, Valérie Haddon “—requesting that I remove Louise from the portrait I'd painted of her and her mother!” John shudders. “She even had the nerve to send a photo of the painting demonstrating the point.”

Shocked, Dolly asks, “What did you say?”

“I wrote back that I could not consent to do that anymore than I would wear my hat in a drawing room or eat peas with a knife. It would ruin the composition.”

Everyone laughs uproariously.

Dolly winks at Polly. “Imagine me writing the Tate, asking that you be removed from our portrait.”

Polly sticks out her tongue at her sister.

“That poor Burckhardt girl,” Fanny murmurs.

“You knew her?” I ask.

“I knew of her,” Fanny replies. “She married Roger Ackerley in the fall of '89. But then she died just eighteen months later. Tuberculosis, I think. She was only twenty-five.”

“Ah yes, ‘The Banana King.’” Peter declares. “He's quite a rounder, that one. Roger only married his second wife—a fledgling actress—after the monthly stipend that was part of the dowry from the dead wife's family finally ended after her mother died. By then, Roger's mistress had popped out three little bastards.”

Dubiously, I ask, “How do you know this?”

Peter shrugs. “Ackerley is a member of one of my clubs. In fact, rumor has it he's got a second illegitimate family tucked away somewhere.”

So, Louise married a serial philanderer!

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During their two brief years of marriage, had she realized this? Had she known it even before their betrothal?

I wouldn't doubt it. As frightened as Louise was about the thought of becoming an old maid, I'm sure she would have grinned and borne it.

"By the way, a client of mine is the very proud owner of Carroll Beckwith's nude portrait of the scandalous Evelyn Nesbit," Henry divulges.

Peter perks up. "I take it, you've seen it then?"

Smirking, Henry nods. "I can see why it caused her husband to murder Stanford White."

Peter chuckles. "I hear it was Beckwith who introduced White to Evelyn."

John's face falls. "Poor Carroll. I doubt he'd have wanted a portrait of the lewd, nude former Mrs. Thaw to be what others remembered him for."

"But they will, won't they?" I reply.

I see I've been too blunt by the glances coming my way.

Shrugging, I add, "There's no reason to pretend otherwise. Bertha died last month, so she won't be hurt by my saying so. She knew Carroll loved beautiful women, but he wooed her and married her. He'd *chosen* her over all the others. When she got older and was no longer his muse, she chose to look the other way when his eye wandered, even to some who were young enough to be his daughters. She did it because she loved him."

I'd met Bertha in Venice along with Carroll when they moved there for a few years, back in '10 or so. She was still a beautiful woman. I found both Beckwiths to be amiable company. By then, all my youthful pangs of love and loss—regarding Carroll, but also Pierre—had been numbed by the reality of middle-aged spinsterhood. And besides, the Beckwith union enlightened me on the rarity of long-term marital bliss, even for one as beautiful as Bertha.

She once divulged how she longed to give Carroll children, but they weren't blessed in that way. I've always wondered if Pozzi's handiwork left me sterile. Having never loved again, I'll never know.

Hearing my kind words about Bertha, tears glisten in Fanny's eyes. "I heard that, in '17, when Mr. Beckwith died suddenly from a heart attack, John was kind enough to take over his art classes for the rest of the semester so Bertha could claim his fees."

"He was...a very dear friend." John closes his eyes.

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“He also arranged for the auction of the paintings that Carroll left behind,” I add. What I don’t say in betrayal of my friendship with Carroll is that John took it upon himself to retouch some of the paintings to completion.

My brother was not oblivious to Carroll’s chagrin over losing commissions to his old friend. One that particularly smarted was that of Richard McCurdy, the president of the Mutual Life Insurance Company. Having already painted Mrs. McCurdy’s portrait at half John’s price, Carroll had also been promised her husband’s commission.

To make it up to his friend, John had the finished portrait of John D. Rockefeller shipped to Beckwith’s studio from Florida. As Rockefeller’s friends stopped by to see it, my brother made their introductions to Carroll with the hope that he, too, would garner a few commissions. What John had not counted on was that his offer to Carroll to make a replica of the painting at Rockefeller’s behest would be viewed as a slight.

Poor Carroll! He’d never made peace with being in John’s shadow. Instead, he tempered his desperation about money and lost opportunities with barbed bravado.

A long moment later, John opens his eyes again. Usually sparkling with life, they’re now listless and rimmed with dark hollows.

Others take note of John’s mood. Like seasoned skaters on thin ice, our guests glide away from talk of old friends no longer amongst the living and on to the safest topic of all: John’s current commission: Princess Mary, Countess of Harewood.

When Peter asks if her husband, Viscount Lascelles, is as dour as he looks, John replies, “Shy men are usually mistaken as such. Not to worry, Peter. You’ll never have that problem”

Dessert has just been served when Nelson asks, “By the way, John, what ever became of the portrait of Dr. Pozzi?”

I’m describing to Alma the final completed panel that precipitated this gathering when, suddenly, my ears prick up at the name of the man who still riles me like no other.

My butcher.

Turning to Fannie on his left, Nelson explains, “I was lucky enough to see it in ‘82 when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy.” Turning to John, he adds, “He’s been gone since...’18 perhaps?”

John nods but says no more.

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“Did he die in the Great War?” Dolly asks.

“No,” I declare. “Pozzi was murdered by a patient who assumed he’d botched his operation.”

Poetic justice.

“I met Pozzi during the War,” Henry says. “When I was in the Medical Corps in Aldershot, French doctors would tour our camp and compare procedure notes. It was before the Department of Information reassigned me to the troop of war artists in Boulogne with John.”

“Peter and I met Pozzi in ‘97,” Alma exclaims. “John introduced us at the Venice Biennale.”

Suddenly, the whole world goes deaf to me. This new knowledge shrouds my eyes in a dark cloud of pain. Pozzi’s face emerges through it, his knowing smirk as clear as if he were standing over me, scalpel in hand, spattered in my blood.

The blood of my unborn child.

Somehow, Peter’s declaration permeates my blank stare: “Alma was translating Italian folksongs. Afterward, we all went over to Palazzo Barbaro. The Curtises hosted us for lunch.”

“John and I played for our supper,” Alma teases him. “Wagner, of course.”

“Doctor Pozzi went as well?” Though I question Peter, my eyes never leave John’s face, now ghostly pale.

“Indeed. And as I recall, your aunt found the doctor quite charming,” Peter responds.

“I’m not surprised,” I murmur.

“John, did the doctor’s portrait leave the family after his death?” Henry asks.

“No.” John’s tone is deathly flat.

“The family did sell a sketch John made of Madame X,” I proclaim.

John had given it to Samuel. But after Samuel’s death, they had no difficulty parting with it. Belle Gardner bought it on the auction block along with a watercolour of *Fumée d’ ambre gris*.

Once again, John’s handiwork has put Amélie and me in the same room.

“Belle also found Pozzi charming,” John admits. “She met him when he came to Boston for a medical conference. In fact, he encouraged her to lend me her portrait for the Biennale.”

“It must have been a big stroke to his ego,” I declare. “Which always got the better of him. By then, even his good Catholic wife abhorred him enough to ask for a divorce. He was estranged from his daughter and a devotee of sex clubs.”

“Not the best dinner conversation,” John mutters.

Since I’ve made my point, I shift the conversation to our upcoming trip to Boston.

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I'll let the Pozzi issue rest—for now, anyway.

Once our dessert plates are emptied and coffee cups left with dregs, John rises. He needs little encouragement to get Alma to join him at the piano for a Wagner duet: one they've rehearsed for the past two decades.

Like me, Peter has heard it enough that I can easily woo him away to my study under the pretense of lending him a book I feel he might enjoy. Once there, his eye will be drawn to a framed sketch of John's painting of Ightham Mote. He's in it, as is Alma, Violet, and his former lover, Elsie.

If it's true that misery loves company, why should I be the only one to suffer for the loss of illicit love?

When we rejoin the others for a final glass of port, I smile through my anger, fooling everyone.

Except for John. He hides his concern well, but the sag of his shoulders and the quick disappearance of his buoyant manner expose his exhaustion.

Intuition is the greatest advantage of long-established friendships. Our guests don't linger when saying their farewells.

As I anticipated, John doesn't walk out with them. Instead, he follows me back into the parlor, pulling its panel doors closed so that Cook can't disturb us while she tidies up the dining room's disorder.

On other such evenings, I help her. But tonight, I have a momentous task at hand:
Reclaiming the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 49

John waits until I've closed the door before handing me a glass of port, then declares, “You aren't happy.”

“Of course not,” I retort. “I never knew you'd met Pozzi in Venice. Why didn't you tell me?”

“What does it matter now?” He tugs on his goatee, his habit when faced with a question he prefers not to answer. Or, in this case, a topic he wishes to forget. “My God—it was almost thirty years ago! If you react this way now, I can only imagine how you would have responded then.”

“Time doesn't heal all wounds, Johnny. If a sore isn't treated, it festers. Pozzi's cut—figuratively and literally—was the cruelest of all. He took my baby from me! Have you forgotten that?” My hand shakes so violently that the port crests the rim of the glass. Slowly, I put it down. “And yet, you reached out to him—*as if nothing happened*—so that you could once again receive the acclaim you always sought for his portrait. As if he hadn't ruined my happiness!”

“Don't you feel you played a part in it too?”

“You dare to blame me?” I sputter.

“Why shouldn't I?” John huffs. “Your naivety could have made laughing stocks of everyone. The Gautreaus, Pozzi...and...” He breathes heavily but stops himself from saying it:

He, too, would have been ruined.

For that, he does not regret my loss:

My child.

“Don't you think I would have wanted the child—to whom I could give my love, unconditionally?” I gasp so hard through my sobs that I don't know if he can understand me. “Someone who could have loved me—like Mother—with you? I have never known that bliss!”

“Bliss? Trust me, it's both a blessing and a curse.”

He saw our mother's love as his curse? How very rich.

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With deadly calm, I declare, “Mother told me you saw what happened to me—the day my back was broken.”

“I...I don’t remember.” John looks away.

“Don’t you? She said she tried to convince you it was a bad dream. You said no. that you saw what she’d done to me—and that you were going to tell Father.”

Tears now etch John’s cheeks. Shamed, he covers his face with his hands.

I pull them away. Holding firm to his wrists, I add: “Mother said she tried to make you understand that Father wanted us to go home to America and that hurting me was the only way in which we could stay abroad. She said she hushed you with a promise: if you forgot what you saw, you would always be able to paint. But if you told me, I would hate her and you too. You promised to keep her secret forever, didn’t you, Johnny?”

My brother sobs uncontrollably, nodding his head all the while.

So, he does remember.

“I... I can still see you,” he whispers, “At the bottom of the steps...like a broken doll.” He bows his head. “Emmy, please. Forgive me.”

Mother bought his silence. I should hate him as much as I hate her.

Then why don’t I?

Of all the marriages I know, few couples are as devoted as John and me.

I am his penance.

And only I can absolve him.

When I put my arms around him, he collapses onto me. “Hush, Johnny. Hush.”

In time, John succumbs to my pleas. We are still for an eternity, two statues chiseled from our mutual grief. When he raises his head again, it’s with a resigned sigh. “Sometimes, my instincts are to please even those whose agenda has never served me. What Pozzi did to you was despicable. But what I did to you... It was just as bad. More so because you’ve proven to be my one true love.”

“Johnny, please. What Mother said about Pozzi—”

“I know it must have been so hard to hear!” he gasps. “And to think you bore it all these years with—*such nobility*.” He grabs my hand as if it’s a lifeline from some Hell only he can see. “To her credit, Mother did what I could never bring myself to do: make you realize that I was right to go along with Pozzi’s lie about the fetus being a tumor; that the Paris scandal—you, having that

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child!—would have been the end of us; that what Pozzi said—*what he did*—was the best solution all around—”

“*Pozzi?...*” The truth roils over me, drowning me in the knowledge of my brother’s duplicity.

John’s confession stops mid-sentence. All color leaves his face when he realizes that he, not Mother, has revealed his other great wrong on my behalf:

He gave Pozzi the approval to do away with the child growing inside me.

It was why Mother jibed me about Pozzi saving me from myself, then mentioned John in the same breath.

I’d made my peace with John’s childish oath to Mother long ago. But the ghost of this crime will always haunt me.

From this day forward, I can never love him again.

I push him away. “I won’t be going with you to Boston.”

“What? ... What d-d-d-do...do you m-m-m-mean?” John’s fear is revealed in the immensity of his stutter.

“We’ve been entwined since my birth. It’s time we untangle our lives and move forward—*separately.*”

“But...You’re the one constant in my life—and me, in yours!”

I shrug. “I’m not saying we’ll never see each other again.”

Relief floods his face. “So, you aren’t talking about moving away.”

“In fact, I am. I’ll return to Paris.”

“For how long?”

I throw up my hands. “What does it matter? Your life is quite full.” He frowns, unsure of my response.

Time to make myself perfectly clear: “I was a fool to sacrifice so much of my life—just because you convinced me you needed me. Not to worry. You have a legion of family and friends who willingly travel with you to be your muses and models, to paint alongside you. They’ll readily fill any gap I leave in the running of your household. And you have more portrait requests than you want—”

“Go back to that pimp’s profession?” he snickers. “I’ve had my last lapse toward ‘*paugh-traiture.*’” His anger slices the word.

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“Lucky you! I can’t wait to feel the same way. I’m going to apply to an atelier again. I want to make my living as an artist.”

John winces. *Finally, he realizes the sacrifices I’ve made for him.*

“You presume too much,” he retorts.

“I’m not asking you to pay for my lessons. I’ve saved enough money. And if need be, I’ll sell my apartment—”

“You misunderstand. I’m saying that you’ll never paint *professionally*.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Sadly, I do.” He moves beside me. “You saw what it took for me to get where I am. You’ve been there every step of the way.”

“I have indeed,” I mutter.

“Which is why you know what it takes to succeed. You saw how I strategized every commission. It wasn’t luck, it was—”

“Cunning,” I murmur.

John demonstrated it when he asked Pozzi if he could paint him right there in front of Duran—to his mentor’s dismay. How John stalked the Gautreaus for Amélie’s blessing to paint her was just as shrewd.

“Yes—exactly. Every decision had to be the right one.” John exclaims. “I could never let my guard down.”

“Regarding your personal life? Right you are! It could have been your downfall.”

He winces at my casual acknowledgment of it.

“On her deathbed, Mother told me I’d been accepted. It was why she burned the letter.”

This revelation is met with a shrug. “If so, she did you a favor.”

John’s bluntness strikes me with the force of a train careening at full speed. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s the truth. You’re not Lucia Fairchild Fuller; God rest her soul. You never had the talent to sustain a career.”

I remember all the hours Lucia spent at his side, drinking from the font of his wisdom: of middle tones and natural light. Of subtle coloring and opulent form. Lucia internalized it all, took it to heart, and used it as her mantra.

I did too. John was her guiding light. But he was mine as well.

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At least, that was what I thought.

“I’m not being cruel,” he continues, “only honest, in the same token that you’re not Paul Helleu or Albert Belleruche—or even that pompous ass, Whistler.”

“Paul had your encouragement—as well as your investment in him. It salvaged his faith in himself. As for Albert, he never wanted a career. But I did! *I do.*”

“You’ve made my point for me. Whether they wanted a career or not, Paul and Albert had talent.” John lays his glass on the table. “In fact, the letter I wrote William Bouguereau at Académie Julian asked that he withdraw your submission. I wrote it was due to a family hardship. Better that than divulging my opinion on your talent.”

Reeling from this new truth, I back away from him.

Noting my revulsion, John adds: “You must believe me when I tell you I spared you the disappointment of public failure. I only wish I could have done the same for so many others. Each lacking something—in Carroll’s case, it was talent. Granted, his technique was impeccable. But there wasn’t any...well, *spark!* For Dennis, it was the bad luck of dying so young. And that lascivious fool, Peter, hasn’t the drive—”

After all these years, I now know what John thinks of me.

But Bouguereau thought otherwise. He believed in me.

It’s time I, too, believe in myself.

“Perhaps you’re right. Or maybe not. In any regard, only my opinion counts.” I walk to the door and open it. Goodbye, John.”

Before I know it, he’s crushing me to his chest. His heart beats so fast. “Forgive me, Emmy, for having been so blunt. It was so long ago! Can’t we p-p-put it behind us?” As always, John’s fear shows itself in his stutter. “Please d-d-d-don’t go! You know everything—my paintings, my finances, my...*my s-s-s-secrets.*”

At last, the truth.

Gently, I step away. “You need not worry, Johnny. Whom you love is not the crime. But the callousness with which you deceived one who has devoted her life to you may give others reason enough to despise you.”

He recoils. I’ve pricked a nerve.

“Admittedly, you have good cause.” A wan smile rises on his lips: proof he accepts my choice. “Goodbye, Emmy.”

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I wait until I hear the front door close before making my way to the window.

I watch as he trudges down the street. His footsteps are slow. He hasn't opened his umbrella against the mild drizzle. A motor car passes. The owner must be a friend because he stops. They converse for a moment, but then John waves him on.

Even in gloomy weather, he likes a stroll after dinner.

A good habit. He gets too little exercise as it is.

I toss and turn throughout the night.

Every memory I hold plays out in a moving picture of surreal dreams. Those who have made their mark on my life repeat our conversations. Their voices, echoing through the hills I trek, shimmer like colorful auroras in the sky above me. No matter the path I choose, it climbs steeply. Or I must traverse narrow twisted trails around menacing corners.

Twice—before my love affair with Pierre and after he deserted me—I had resigned myself to think a desolate future awaited me. Is this it?

No, a voice tells me. *This is your past.*

Suddenly the raging sky softens into brilliance. Calmness washes over me. With a few steps, I crest the hill and find the entire expanse of my life before me:

Places I will travel, experiences awaiting me, lessons still to learn;

And the paintings I'll create.

My dear friends are there, as are Violet and her precious family...

Where is John?

Then I see him: on another hill. His back is to me.

I call out his name, but he doesn't hear me.

When, suddenly, John turns around, he's smiling. His lips move, but I can't hear him.

I see the sadness in his eyes—until he shuts them.

My lids close, too, weighted with the pain of our shared secrets.

As I drift into oblivion, the voice I hear is my own: "I forgive you."

Rap, rap, rap...

Then again, only louder and quicker: *RAP-RAP-RAP-RAP.*

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Light filters through the curtains. With no excuse to plead for more sleep, I rise with a groan, grab my robe, and stumble to the door.

Sobbing, Cook insists I take a call from John’s housekeeper.

I run to the phone. Because the housekeeper is screaming, I hold it away from my ear.

I can barely make sense of what she says: something about how John didn’t answer her knocks, but because she knew he never slept in so late, she opened the door. The lamp on the bedside table was still on, and John’s eyes were closed as if he were asleep, his glasses pushed high on his forehead. Softly, she called out his name, but he didn’t move or answer.

Concerned, she made her way to the bed. John’s pallor was gray. His hand was cold to her touch, and “that old French book he reads so often, to put himself to sleep”—she means *Dictionnaire philosophique*—was resting on his chest.

I assure her I’ll be right over.

Cook, too, is crying hard now. As I hold her in my arms, comforting her just as I’d consoled Johnny last night, I think about my dream;

Of his sad smile.

I must call Violet to let her know.

CHAPTER 50

Violet and I hold hands graveside at the Brookwood Cemetery.

Nelson is beside me, and Thomas Fox is directly behind us. I know they've positioned themselves this way because they're concerned I may pass out from my grief.

Not that I blame them. My comatose state this past week has been of tremendous concern, especially to Violet.

I don't dare tell her of my last conversation with John.

As one would expect, John's sudden death shocked those who revered him. But even the army of friends here to mourn him are far outnumbered by those to whom the term "Sargentolatry" aptly applies.

Or, as John once sheepishly called them, "my adoring fans."

An emissary for the Archbishop of Canterbury waits patiently to the side as those closest to us pay their respects. Finally, he asks for a word in private, pointing toward a nearby bench.

Violet's eyes move to Ward and Thomas. Their slight nods assure her that they'll stay at our side. Francis suggests that he take their sons—Jean Louis, Guillaume, and Henri—home and wait there for us. Their daughter, Reine, is now in that inevitable state of pregnancy where everything makes her weep. She has already headed to her automobile with her husband, Hugo. She was inconsolable throughout the funeral. Like her dearly departed sister, Rose Marie, she was very close to John, who had commemorated both girls in so many paintings.

Noting our grief-stricken faces, the emissary wastes no time. "The archbishop has agreed to your request to hold Mr. Sargent's memorial service at Westminster Abbey this Saturday. It will be a full-dress occasion. He wants me to assure you that he'll be in attendance."

In other words, the archbishop was yet another fan of my brother.

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He'll be in great company. John's friend, Sir Philip Sassoon, has already informed us that he'll be representing the British government at all memorials in John's honor. England's major museums have confirmed their intention to send representatives. Sir Frank Dicksee, president of the Royal Academy of Art, will also be there. In fact, he's suggested that there be a memorial exhibition. Similar requests have come in from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and, of course, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Even the American Embassy is sending an attaché. John had represented our country well overseas.

Violet listens to the emissary. But in my fogged state, I'm still too numb to grasp the minute details of commemorating the one person I loved like no other—

Until I realized his duplicity.

My mind and heart are now consumed with guilt for the role I may have played in John's unexpected demise.

"The song we've chosen to close John's memorial service—with your approval, of course—is Handel's *Dead March in Saul*," the emissary explains. "It's to be sung with a full choir."

Would John have appreciated it? Perhaps.

If I weren't more than a mere ghost of myself, I might insist on a piece from a composer John knew personally, Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem, Opus 48*. Louis de Fourcaud's *Nocturne* would also be a touching send-off...

But I say nothing.

In time, the emissary takes his leave.

When I rise, Nelson gently places his hand on my arm. "We don't have to talk about this now, but at some point, Thomas and I recommend that you and Violet consider what is to be done with John's estate."

Violet stares, perplexed. "You've already told us what we will receive and how."

Except for two small cash legacies—£ 5,000 for Alice Barnard and £ 200 to John's former servant, Nicola d'Inverno—the terms of John's will are quite clear on an equitable distribution between my sister and me. However, John left Violet's share of his estate in a trust with the caveat that she will receive an annuity during her life "without power of anticipation or assignment and not subject to be reached by any creditor of hers." Upon her death, the balance is to be distributed "to and among her issue."

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In other words, Francis can never touch it.

“Specifically, I mean what is to be done with all of John’s paintings.” Thomas hesitates. “Your brother left a large body of work. Already museums from all over the world are contacting us with offers to purchase them.”

“To do his legacy justice, every work must be cataloged,” Nelson adds. “To be perfectly honest, the groundswell is for the more renowned pieces of John’s personal collection. But even secondary sketches of his more celebrated paintings will fetch a pretty penny.”

Horrified, Violet stares at him. I imagine she’s thinking of all the canvases stacked in the Tite Street and Fulham studios and the trunks filled with hundreds—no, *thousands*—of John’s watercolors and sketches.

Then I think of the portrait in John’s dining room of Albert Belleruche. The real blasphemy isn’t the love they shared. I could never sell it, nor John’s other treasured works.

I won’t. Albert’s portrait and the others are the essences of what Johnny was about.

Nelson frowns at Violet’s reticence. “Let me make this perfectly clear: John’s legacy is now yours, your children’s, and their descendants. Frankly, now is the time to make the most of it.” Quickly, he adds, “You too, Emily.”

“Francis wouldn’t agree,” Violet stammers. “I have the boys! And Reine is with child....”

Already, she’s distancing herself from the tedious work at hand. Pretty pennies mean nothing to Francis, whose aging mother’s estate will someday be his.

Whereas I have little to call my own and no one to care for.

Even after his death, I remain John’s caretaker.

I stare at his tall grave marker. Its first line, a Benedictine phrase in Latin, was Thomas’s suggestion:

LABORARE EST ORARE

JOHN S. SARGENT R.A.

BORN IN FLORENCE

JAN 12th 1856

DIED IN LONDON

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APRIL 15th 1925

HE GIVETH HIS BELOVED SLEEP

“Why did the carver leave a gap between the date of John’s death and the eulogy?” I ask.

“We discussed it when we picked out the headstone,” Violet chides me. “You agreed that, when your time comes, it would be less costly to bury you with John.”

John and I, together in the hereafter too.

How fitting.

CHAPTER 51

MAY 22, 1936 - ZÜRICH

I've always found it beautiful here in spring,” Violet declares. “Why do you suppose Mother disliked it?”

From where we stand, midspan on Münsterbrücke Bridge, all of Zürich is laid out before us on this glorious day. The twin towers of Grossmünster are to our right. To our left, the steeple of Fraumünster Church pierces a cloudless sky reflected in crystalline blue Lake Zürich. Except for the pinky finger of water flowing beneath it, the lake glistens before us.

“What was the point?” I reply. “John wasn’t with us.”

“You were just as enthralled with him!” Violet retorts bitterly. “You did what you could to stay at his side as opposed to Father’s—or mine.”

Her resentment grows out of her lifelong fear of being left behind, never to have been loved. She avoided that fate. It fell to me instead.

Except for a few precious weeks almost fifty years ago.

I shrug. “As it turns out, John wanted us all at his side anyway. Otherwise, he too would have been lonely.”

Violet apologizes with a gentle kiss.

John substituted work for love. It consumed his life.

Had he been allowed to love openly and proudly, would we have avoided the scandal that ruined our futures so many years ago? Would I have spent my life with Pierre?

I’ll never know.

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In time, John realized that the devotion of an adoring sister could be as steadfast as that of the most ardent lover. In my case, even stronger.

Even after I learned of his pact with Mother.

I forgave him. My vengeance against Amélie served as his penance.

He profited from that pact. But so did we all. After John's death, the Christies auction of his personal collection of paintings—those that didn't hold sentimental value to Violet or me—brought in almost three million dollars. For the museums and wealthy magnates who recognize John's role as the chronicler of an era and its society, the bonus is that his art is ageless.

Violet and I became guardians of what is left of his life work. It took eleven years to sort through every painting, etching, sketch and drawing. We contacted museum curators worldwide, gauging their interest in what had not been purchased or bequeathed to his favorite museums—Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Tate, The Metropolitan, The National Gallery, and of course, Belle Gardner's museum.

Ironically, John's legacy is now mine too. But I no longer resent devoting my life to this task. I learned to separate the man from his work.

Time will tell if his paintings are priceless. I've already paid greatly for them. I learned this when he confessed that he sabotaged my chance for a career.

A strange sight occurs behind Violet: a manservant struggles as he pushes his master's wheelchair up the bridge's slight incline.

Despite the warmth of the day, the old man in the chair wears a thick scarf. His hands are gloved. The wind whips at the plaid blanket covering his lap, revealing his spindly legs. He is small in the way aging makes us all. But the one thing that never diminishes is the gleam of the soul. It glows brightly in his eyes.

The old man's gaze is one I've never forgotten. It is Pierre.

The tears etching a trail down his face show me he recognizes me too.

Violet waves at Reine, who stands at the bridge's other end with her two young daughters. She calls out: "Shall we have lunch at our hotel?" Her mother nods.

I release my sister with a hug and a promise to join them later.

By the time I reach Pierre's side, he's yet to convince his servant that, despite his fragility, his cane will suffice for the walk to a neighboring cafe.

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Smiling at the servant, I hold out my hand to Pierre. “We are old acquaintances. I am happy to assist Monsieur Gautreau as we walk to the café. Afterward, I’ll return him to the hotel.”

The man frowns. My advanced age, compounded with my awkward posture, leaves him doubtful. Still, his face softens when Pierre kisses my hand and then places it against his cheek.

I’m crying too, but because Pierre now stands and holds both my hands, my tears fall where they may.

As we make our way, we ignore the spritely tread of the servant who follows a few paces behind, but only as far as the café’s door.

Neither of us talks until we’re seated. We order, but the food is merely an excuse to spend time together...

But to what end? Reminiscences?

Certainly not! Our tale did not end well.

Apologies? I was wronged by Amélie, Pozzi, and John—and yes, Pierre.

Each to whom I retaliated.

And yet, Pierre isn’t angry, ashamed, or remorseful. He acts like a man in love; like a man who has once again found the one he adores most and revels in being with her.

Always, and forever.

Despite what I’d done to ruin his wife.

How could that be?

In time, he says: “The painting of dear Louise, at the brook with me was the kindest gift.”

I look down into my lap. “By chance, I’d heard of her passing. All those years, no one had seen it. It was right for you to have since it memorialized the love you shared.”

“Thank you.” Those two grace-filled words are hollowed out by his pain.

I want to hold him, to soothe him. Perhaps John was right when he said, *After one’s death, sentiment, like anger, loses all value.*

In time, Pierre collects himself. He wipes his face with his kerchief. Finally, he asks: “Can you forgive me?”

His question pitches me into the vast sea of memories only we share. I feel like I’m drowning in the tempestuous waves of anger at John.

At Amélie.

THE PARIS SCANDAL – J. MARTINEZ BROWN

Will Pierre be shocked at my many acts of vengeance toward her?

The only ballast I can cling to is the truth as I know it. “I should be asking your forgiveness instead.”

He stares, disbelieving. “Dear Emily—why?”

“You be the judge.” I start at the beginning...

Twilight is the gentlest moment of the day.

The evening’s first shadows coddle all resolve of a restless society in the crook of its elbow. There, mankind can suckle contentedly on its assumption that today’s accomplishments, though not nearly enough, were at least adequate.

My day’s achievement—this tale of our lost love—has been fifty years in the making. Hearing it, Pierre’s face reflects more agony than any one person should feel in a lifetime.

With my words, I’ve painted a self-portrait. At what angle does Pierre view me? Am I the torturously shy young woman, the hungry lover, or the bitter, vengeful old spinster?

Now that I’ve admitted to being Amélie’s lifelong tormentor, I imagine he sees me as the duplicitous conniver who resented the life he shared with her. Or that he’s dismayed to know I spent the rest of my days feeding my brother’s ill will toward her.

Both assumptions are valid.

I convinced John to ruin Amélie’s portrait; and, with it, their reputations.

Then, when Amélie wrote John about the Kaiser’s request to exhibit her portrait, the case I made to my brother as to why he should say no was my vengeance on her last attempt to reclaim her hold on the one thing she treasured above all else: her youthful beauty.

After our chance meeting on that beach in Cannes, I sent Amélie the odious Montesquieu’s cruel poem about her, fomenting her decision to spend the rest of her life as a recluse.

If Pierre views me as a monster, I’ll remind him that his actions created me.

Imagine my shock when he whispers: “Had I defied John, none of this would have happened!”

I stare at him. “How?”

“Had I demanded to see you, had I waited—no matter how long it took, no matter what he said or threatened—we would have spent our lives together.”

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The memory of Pierre on John’s doorstep flashes before me. “My brother tried to usher you in, but you wouldn’t cross our threshold. He said when he informed you of what Amélie and Samuel had done to me, despite their actions, you were relieved. And I’d been right to encourage you to stay married to Amélie—not just for Louise’s sake, but because eventually, Amélie would realize how much you loved her.” My sobs choke me. “You knew what she’d done! You accepted it. You chose her over me.”

Pierre’s firm grip surprises me. Through cold eyes, he stares at me. “I swear on my dear sweet Louise’s grave: John lied to you.”

Pierre never knew?...

I’m too stunned to speak.

He slouches in the chair, but his glare doesn’t soften. “I knew nothing of the abominable incident. Then, one day—a fortnight after Amélie returned to Paris—she and her mother left for a dress fitting. Louise’s governess, Pauline, told me what had transpired. She was abhorred by what she saw. She gave her notice. Were she to tell Amélie why she would be leaving, she’d have been fired without references.” He shakes his head, disgusted. “I vowed to divorce Amélie. I sent a telegram immediately, requesting to see you the next day. John arranged for me to come to his studio, but then he refused to let me in. He accused me of being cavalier with your affections and Amélie’s.”

Viperine anger coils through at the memory of my brother braced on his doorstep. “John pretended to send a letter the night he returned—at least a fortnight before your telegram. Had I not been at the house when yours was delivered, I’d have assumed you hadn’t responded, that you had no desire to see me again. Your telegram forced the meeting. Then, unwittingly, I played right into his plan by allowing him to convince me to wait upstairs while he talked to you.”

“When you left, he told me you were traumatized from the incident and never wanted to see me again,” Pierre replies. “Hoping it would convince him otherwise, I divulged your guilt in breaking up our marriage; that you were worried about its effect on Louise and her future, and how you thought Amélie may come to her senses one day and realize how much you loved her. I informed him I told you I no longer loved Amélie and was leaving her. John then insisted you feared your reputation would be forever ruined should word of the scandal get out. He begged me to honor your wish to leave you alone and put Louise first despite Amélie’s foolhardiness.” Pierre looks away. “I swore to do so.”

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“Is that why you were so distant when you came to approve the painting’s fallen strap and again when we met at the Salon?”

“Yes,” he admits. “I had to fight the urge to tell you how bereft I was without you.”

I think of how John tried to convince me that loving Pierre was a folly. After all, he was married to the most captivating woman in Paris.

My brother’s motive is now crystal clear: Pierre was livid enough to divorce Amélie for her collusion in Pozzi’s act and run away with me—

And John’s reputation would have been ruined even before the painting’s debut.

John lied to him—

The way he lied to me about giving Pozzi the approval to do away with my child.

Pierre’s baby.

Had I not seen the fetus, I never would have known.

Mother taunted me that Pozzi—and John too—had saved me from myself.

And why, when I’d confronted Amélie in Cannes, she thought I’d misspoken for assuming John hadn’t known of her unforgivable deed.

As if reading my thoughts, Pierre adds, “You’d once asked me why I finally consented to let Amélie be painted by John. I told you it was fated to be. In truth, I’d fallen out of love with her.” He sighs. “She was obsessed with Pozzi. No matter what I did to prove I was worthy of her—no matter how hard I tried to hold on to her—it would never be enough to break his spell.”

“So, you gave up on her,” I reason. “And you gave in to her request to be painted by John.”

He nods. “I knew it would be a masterpiece. Pozzi’s portrait proved it. My God, yours too—the one of the Arab temptress—was just as mesmerizing if not more so! I knew John’s painting would reflect her true self: the haughty, selfish being who laughed at the norms that bound the rest of us. I knew the painting would ruin her. It’s why I didn’t protest the fallen strap.” He sighs. “After what Amélie did to you—to us—you were right to plot against her.”

“I have no regrets,” I admit.

“And John—do you hate him?” he asks.

I don’t know the answer. Were the subsequent years of social exile caused by the painting’s scandal enough of a penance?

No, I now realize. John’s numerous duplicities set us on parallel paths of destruction.

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The first was his pact to uphold Mother’s lie. When he confessed to remembering it, I forgave him. I felt that my retribution against Amélie, which almost ruined him too, evened the score.

To learn how John undermined my chances at Académie Julian was heartbreaking. Until today, I’d thought his most egregious deceit was allowing Pozzi to kill the baby growing inside me. Now, after learning of the lies he told that kept Pierre and me apart all these years...

“Yes, I hate him for what he did to me—to us!” I admit. “The last time I saw my brother, he tried to confess to me. He called me ‘his one true love.’ I told him it wasn’t consolation enough. I feel it more so now.”

Pierre’s attempt to smile is bleak. “At the very least, he and I shared that.”

Pierre loves me still.

Tears now run down my cheeks. When I raise my hand to wipe them away, he grasps it, pulling me in close.

We kiss.

Although my eyes are closed, just like that, the dark veil of time—the fifty-two years in which I’ve lived without Pierre’s touch—is lifted, and the memories of our passion consume me.

I see us: entwined in each other’s arms, breathless and naked, our once young bodies damp from the sheen of our fervent forbidden lust. Pierre holds me so close that I can feel his heart beating in tandem with mine. When I look into his face, his eyes are bright with adoration.

My heart, unshackled from decades of anger and sadness, now soars high above us: yes, the young lovers we were then. But also who we are now: old acquaintances freed from a lifetime of regret by the knowledge that our love was steadfast and true.

Once again, I am whole.

Without a word, I rise. Unsteadily, Pierre follows suit. Arm in arm, we walk to the door.

By the time we reach the street corner, the sun has set behind Fraumünster. The streetlamp’s glow creates shadows.

Pierre faces me so he can read my eyes as he asks: “This is goodbye, isn’t it? Or... Perhaps we can begin all over again?”

Before I can answer, Pierre leans on his cane, only to slip and stumble into the street.

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Startled, I step off the curb. With all my might, I struggle to lift him to his feet.

Gingerly, he steps onto the sidewalk.

I try to follow, but the heel of my shoe is wedged in the street's cobblestones.

I hear the sports coupe before I see it careening toward me. Its driver, enthralled by the antics of his giggling girlfriend, has underestimated his speed.

Nor does he see the old woman crouched in their path.

Even Pierre is unaware of my fate until it is too late:

For me to grab his outstretched hand. Or to smile back.

Let alone say, *Yes, I want to spend what is left of my life with you.*

THE END



The Sargent House Museum Among Six Institutions to Receive Works by Emily Sargent

Little-known sister of John Singer Sargent was life-long watercolorist

GLOUCESTER, May 1, 2022 – The Sargent House Museum today announced acquisition of 15 watercolor paintings by Emily Sargent, a late 19th-early 20th century American artist and sister of famed portrait painter John Singer Sargent. The Sargent House Museum is one of six institutions including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Tate Gallery in London, and the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at Oxford University, to receive the artworks in a distribution by the Sargent family.

Emily Sargent, born to American parents in Rome in 1857, painted throughout her lifetime but rarely exhibited. Much of her output was presumed lost after her death in 1936, but a cache of some 440 works was found in the attic of a Sargent family home more than 60 years after her death. Following the 1998 discovery, the works remained in family hands until the current distribution.

The Sargent House Museum's plans to exhibit the watercolors are now in progress and will likely include photographs, maps, letters and period costumes highlighting Emily Sargent's extensive travels through Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. These locations provided the inspiration for many of the newly acquired works, most of which date to the early decades of the 20th century.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Paris Scandal is an eight-year passion project. Since childhood, I've been drawn to John Singer Sargent's paintings.

I have a deep interest in, and appreciation for, the eras he straddled and the countries he called home. I've read every known biography and academic paper on the painter, as well as the diaries and correspondence with Emily and John's legion of friends, which gave great insight into their wayfaring childhoods, personalities, and to some extent, their secrets.

As a storyteller, I chose to make this Emily's story first and foremost.

A proficient artist and pianist like her brother, Emily's gender and disability hindered her from receiving opportunities availed to John. We know she aided and abetted his professional and home lives and that she was his closest confidant throughout his lifetime. Is it accurate to say she lived vicariously through him? I contend that, with her help, he lived his best, most productive life.

The others mentioned in my work are more than mere characters in a novel. They interacted with the Sargents as family, friends, patrons, and artistic subjects. Some of what they say here is taken directly from their written and spoken words. I attempted to stay true to the timeline when these characters and the Sargents crossed paths. However, in many of the book's scenes, their thoughts, deeds, and intimate conversations are sheer conjecture.

As for Amélie and Samuel, besides being subjects for two of John's most renowned portraits, if the gossip of the time is to be believed, the affair between them was an open secret.

Those who live beside giants often find it hard to stand outside the reach of their shadows. Because of John's painting of Amélie, I would imagine Emily had many opportunities to meet and converse with Pierre Gautreau. But the love affair depicted here is my fantasy, not documented fact.

As they did in real life, this novel's two principal lovers—Emily and Pierre—share strength of character, intelligence, and a worldly outlook. Such traits could certainly spark a flame of desire between two quiet individuals who were always waiting in the wings of the stage where their celebrated loved ones held the spotlight.

This book is Emily's time to shine.

—*J. Martinez Brown*