

VI— In the Garden



— *Camille Pissarro, date unknown*

BY seven-thirty guests had begun to arrive. Nicola stood beside her mother and grandfather to greet them as they were led into the vast hall. Mostly there were painters, of course, but also a director of plays at the repertory theatre, a balding German sculptor and his boyfriend, a pointillist from Oregon; a skeletal media artist from California and a plump poet who wrote Haiku. Marc Kreicek arrived and Nicola watched him closely as he greeted her mother, but there was nothing unusual in his manner. Reassuringly, he'd brought a date, an attractive woman named Elyse, and he greeted Nicola with mock formality, kissing her hand. She was distracted from her worries by all the new faces, and the clothes. She studied the evening dresses that swished past, the lines of the suits.

Robin was among the last to arrive, entering with a cold gust of wind and without his son, a student at the college, who Nicola planned to marry once the age difference no longer mattered. For now, Joshua Dresden called her "kid" and tousled her hair; the last time she saw him he'd tossed her into the pool. Still, she'd hoped he would come. For his part, Robin looked very handsome in a black trench coat with a white silk scarf, which he handed off to Henri, revealing a charcoal silk suit that matched his eyes. He swept Nicola into a dizzying hug and the distinctive scent of his cologne washed over her: spice, musk, and something else. Sharp but lingering, and like his paintings, impossible to pin down. She liked it a lot.

"I haven't seen you in *two* weeks," she said, leveling an accusing glance at him.

"I know, Nico," he said, softly. "I've missed you, too." He leaned forward to kiss her mother, whispering something in her ear that made her smile, and shook her grandfather's hand. He introduces his date, a stunning young brunette who might have stepped from a magazine, named Chelsea Delaney. Her perfection depressed Nicola so terribly that she was glad to see past her to Great Aunt Eleanor, arriving last, as if to provide contrast. Distinguished by her flaming red hair, purple eye shadow and multi-colored caftans, she had no children of her own, and was only moderately fond of her nephew— but did, at seventy-four, enjoy a good party.

At last Henri motioned that her father's car had arrived.

"He's coming!" Gisèle announced, and conversation abruptly ceased. There was only the swish of fabric, and a few random whispers of *Shhh!!* as the lights went out. Nicola could still see the outline of the cake prominently displayed on its easel at the center of the wide hall. Stacks of *Reflex* and *ARTnews* were spread on the table beside it. They heard the door open and close, as her father greeted Henri. And then the click-clack of his footsteps on the tile floor. "Why are all the lights—"

They flew on all at once: "Sur-prise!!!"

Her father stumbled backward, bewildered, and broke into a wide grin as her mother stepped forward to kiss him. "Congratulations, Dad!" Nicola whispered, and stepped on tiptoe to kiss him, too. The music began, and waiters navigated the crowd with trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

As the room hummed to life Nicola stood back, surveying the room. So much for wearing her hair up to look older; there wasn't anyone young enough to notice. With a sigh, she reconciled herself to being a "voyeur" of the spectacle around her (having looked up the word in the dictionary), and when dinner was served, chose to eat in the kitchen with Mrs. Pengilly and Maggie, preferring their gossip to the more cryptic kind at the long table assembled for the others. But afterward curiosity got the better of her, and she ventured out again into the music and laughter.

As she stepped into the great hall, her grandfather caught sight of her and said, "*Mon chaton*, how very lovely you are." She liked the way he put things; not how lovely you look, but how lovely you *are*. One look at her face and he understood. With a slight brush of his fingers beneath her chin, "Ah, but you're bored with the grown-ups, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"A little."

"Truth be told, so am I," he whispered, raising a finger to his lips. "Will you do me the honor of a dance, *ma belle* Nicola?" He bowed before her formally.

"I'd like to, Grand-père, but my shoes..." She winced. "They felt fine in the store—"

"*Eh, bien, chérie*. Let's set the shoes aside then, hmm?"

Nicola kicked them off gladly, and he whisked her into an old-fashioned waltz. She enjoyed the amused smiles of those they swished past, and there was no need to count steps. Grand-père whirled her around most of the time, so that she felt dizzy by the end of the song, and quite cheered.

Then her mother brought her punch and introduced her to the sort of people who never remembered her name afterward. Her father rescued her, bringing them slices of cake, and she and her mother shared Mona Lisa's smile. But the highlight of the evening was cards. Her grandfather and Robin escaped to one of the side rooms and got a game going. For as long as Nicola could remember they'd played Pinochle, and she had played with Robin.

"It gives me a clear advantage," he claimed, and went on to tell Chelsea about the double run Nicola had gotten the first time they'd been partners. "Barely tall enough to see over the table, pink curlers in her hair, and she proceeded to win the game with a single hand."

Chelsea sat perched on his knee, sipping champagne and offering Nicola an indulgent languorous smile. Nicola bet she didn't even know what a double run was. As if reading her mind, Robin caught her eye and gave her a wink.

Her grandfather lit his pipe, and shuffled the cards in his funny French way and all was right with the world. Her lucky streak continued, and Nicola enjoyed Chelsea's faintly startled expression when she announced triumphantly that she was going to 'shoot the moon.' When she'd taken all the tricks, Robin gave her a celebratory sip of his scotch that tasted bad and made her throat burn, but also made her feel quite grown up and as though she belonged.

But at midnight, the party was over for Nicola. They were going to show some of her father's paintings and toast the upcoming exhibition. At the pool house that afternoon she'd watched a lighting crew assemble festive torches and ground lights at the base of several easels. It would be beautiful at night, with light reflecting off the windows, and stars visible through the skylights above. The pool would act as jeweled centerpiece, a cool glimmering aquamarine.

Maggie came to collect her at fifteen minutes before the hour. Nicola could hear the music drift tantalizingly up the stairs from below, but faked a yawn for Maggie's benefit, brushed her teeth

and hugged her good night. She waited till she heard her footsteps fade away down the hall, and then took the back stairs down again. She was still buoyed by the win at cards and knew the party would continue well into the night. They were a long winding way from town, and many of the guests would stay over. Secreting a glass of champagne from a discarded tray on a tabletop in the hall, she slipped out into the garden.

Before long the music died, voices faded, and Nicola wandered through the cool garden in her slippers wondering what it must feel to be the object of so much attention. Everyone was calling the paintings, “The Gisèle Paintings,” and part of her cringed at the idea, but it was wonderful too, in a way. One day she hoped someone would want to paint her.

The doors to the outer terraces had been flung wide for the guests to move in and out, but the walled inner garden was private. Nicola could see through a darkened sitting room into the hall, to the three-piece band as it started up again. She envisioned the elegant couples entwined and gliding across the floor; now and then their shadowed silhouettes passed the arched doorway. Were her parents among them? Marc and his date, Elyse? Robin and Chelsea?

Nicola danced outside by herself. It was funny how naturally the steps came when no one was watching. She sipped more of the champagne. The first sip had tasted like toothpaste and the second made her pucker, but the rest was fizzy and pleasantly forbidden, and made everything seem all at once... lighter. She giggled, and in her mind she danced with Josh Dresden in a great ballroom: no longer eleven-year-old Nicola Farrell, but a world-class designer of Paris and Milan, her body not awkward and under-developed, but lovely and lithe like a fashion model's. Fashion models didn't need to pad their bras; they were chic, anyway.

At last she sank down onto a bench in the far corner of the courtyard, her head still light, but her eyelids heavy. From here she could see only a sliver of light from inside, along the trunk of her favorite tree whose limbs formed a canopy beneath the night sky. It rose from the exact center of the garden, an ancient broad-limbed English oak that had been there long before she was born, long before the house was even built, her grandfather said. Robin's uncle had built the inner courtyard

around *it*. The outline of its trunk was thick and black and immutable, even as it softened at the edges and grew hazy. Nicola watched, lulled to sleep by the ballad that floated out to her on the cool night air. For a moment, she was strangely weightless and then all at once she was dreaming.

With a start she heard her mother's voice. It was thick with emotion or with wine; the words floated in and out of clarity. "Please... it's nothing." A murmur came in reply, lower than the rustle of leaves. And then the tone of her mother's voice brought Nicola fully conscious. "But I don't know why. I've never known." There was desperation in the words and Nicola sat straight up, blinking in the dark. She started to rise from the bench, but something stopped her.

Again, the man's answer was too low to distinguish, but came in a rhythm like poetry. She caught random words: "barely dressed"... "indiscreet." She squinted hard, but he was hidden by the trunk of the tree; she could see only her mother's silhouette beside the gnarled oak, her jeweled dress glistening in the darkness like the sliver of moon above. Nicola tried to make herself small so she wouldn't be seen. Her mother would be angry if she saw the champagne.

Then the man's hand reached out to wipe Gisèle's cheek. *Why was she crying?* Nicola sat straight up, her fingers gripped the arm of the bench, but there was an intimacy in the simple gesture she couldn't interrupt. It must be her father. But a finger of doubt crept in. After what she'd seen in the morning room yesterday, could it be Marc Kreicek? Maybe her *mother* was having the affair.

Gisèle's lips moved and Nicola barely heard her. "Stop it. What is it you want me to say?" ... "Yes, I love you—" She stepped forward and sighed. "Of course, I do." In a slow graceful movement, Gisèle stood on tiptoe, a hand appeared at her waist. And Nicola knew what was going to happen next; it was always that way in the movies before the kiss.

But beyond her, across the garden, a figure materialized on the terrace like a ghost, and Nicola jumped in surprise, kicking the crystal flute with her slipper. It shot out from beneath the bench and the sound of shattering glass filled the courtyard. It wasn't a ghost; it was her father on

the terrace. And for a moment, just a moment, she'd caught a glimpse of the man behind the tree. She knew him in an instant; she'd known him all her life. His black silhouette disappeared almost at once, but she understood now why his voice was indistinguishable, its low melodic accent lost in the rustle of leaves in the wind. It was her grandfather.

Gisèle was frozen, uncomprehending, her eyes shifted from her daughter to her husband, and back again. Luke stared, his hands limp at his sides. Light shown on his face and he looked like Nicola felt. Horrified.

"Nicola, go in." Gisèle's moonlit form did not turn, but her voice was so sharp, so unfamiliar, that Nicola's body responded automatically, rising from the bench. Hesitating, she turned back again. Her father had gone.

"*Go to your room—*" Her mother didn't exactly yell; it was something worse than that, something awful, like the sound of a teapot screeching; it made the hair rise on Nicola's arms.

She ran as fast as she could from the garden, pushed open the French doors and raced up the stairs without turning back. But once in her room, she ran to the window. The thick fingers of her broad oak were barely discernible beneath the leaves that stretched forward, trying to touch the glass. No one was there; it was empty and black. The moon too had disappeared.

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LUKE stepped in from the terrace. *Escape. Escape.* It beat in his brain, sounded in his ears. He had to get away. Walking quickly through the darkened sitting room, his head was awash with half-formed thoughts and undefined sensations that told a single story; like the scent of jasmine made him think all at once of the river in Virginia where he'd lived as a child and his father's brooding frown, and his mother dying, and his first kiss, and a dirty novel he'd read when he was twelve and hidden in a hollow tree trunk covered with moss: love, loss, loneliness, and yearning like a cloud of mosquitoes buzzing at once.

Luke could smell jasmine in the dimmed light of the hall.

He gazed blindly through the thinning crowd of couples, nothing more than oblivious props to him now, well-dressed puppets on a string. It was a party thrown for the benefit of others, a masque, but one he'd almost begun to believe. Now he realized Gisèle was in on the masquerade.

Robin Dresden stood across the hall from him in the doorway of the drawing room, contemplating him over his snifter of brandy. Luke glanced around for some means of escape. He was in no condition to speak to anyone. And who, he wondered, was going to speak to Nicola? *Had she seen Tristan?* Surely not. It was his only comfort. The oak tree was in the way; it was dark. She had only witnessed her mother kiss 'someone' that wasn't him. A wave of nausea made him close his eyes, but in his mind he saw their silhouettes joined, Gisèle's fingers caressing her father's neck.

"Luke?" There was a sharp glint in Robin's dark eyes that made Luke feel he'd read the story of his life in that one unguarded moment. "You look knackered. Too much champagne?"

Luke managed some sort of wordless reply.

"Where have Tristan and Gisèle gotten off to?"

To his jaded mind, it seemed a double entendre. "Not sure," he replied acidly. "Bed?"

Robin slipped a hand in his pocket, and raised a shrewd brow. "Had a falling out with Tristan, have you?" When Luke only stared, he went on, "The two of you can barely stand to be in the same room lately. It's no surprise, really."

"No?"

"You're coming into your own." Robin swirled his brandy; Luke's head spun round and round with the amber liquid. "You must think it's time you and Elle were independent of Tristan."

Luke hesitated. "Somehow I don't think she'll go."

"Ah. Well, there is that. Maybe it's time you were independent of *them*. Theirs is a complex relationship. You see it more often between mothers and sons, this sort of dependency. But I see its effects on Nicola, too, and that troubles me. It often happens in wealthy families. One would think their world limitless, but it's often perversely small."

It's often simply perverse, thought Luke. He swallowed. "I need to ask you something—"

But Robin's date, a lovely thing in her early twenties, had floated down the stairs. She tugged on his hand, and he turned. Her green eyes sparkled with youth and champagne and utter infatuation. "We've switched rooms with Marc and Elyse," she murmured. "She liked our view better." With a flirtatious dip of her lashes and a giggle, Luke could barely hear, "... bigger bed."

Robin slipped a hand around her waist. "We'll talk in the morning, eh? Get a bit of rest."

But rest was the last thing on Luke's mind.

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THERE had been no yelling, as Nicola expected. Her mother's voice and her father's: slammed doors and angry words she couldn't make out. Then she remembered that the house would be full tonight. It was a tradition: brunch the day after for an intimate bleary-eyed group, those closest to the family. And so there had been no yelling. There had been no noise at all.

She must have fallen asleep. But very late or rather, very early, there came a knock on her door: a soft knock, her mother's. "Nicola? Please let me in—"

Nicola sat up; the bed springs giving her away with a slight squeak that screamed in the stillness. She watched as the knob twitched under her mother's fingers but did not give. She had locked it.

"Darling, can you hear me? Please let me explain."

She said nothing.

"Nicola... I— please forgive me, darling. Please forgive me." Gisèle's voice broke, and still Nicola sat perched on her bed, staring at the door. She opened her mouth to answer, but no sound came. Her mother's voice had made it all real. The kiss in the garden hadn't been a dream or a figment of her imagination.

And at last she heard her mother's soft steps receding down the hall.

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LUKE liked to think he was capable of understanding, of empathy. It was this that drove him to Gisèle's bedroom at half past two that morning. Her door was locked, yet he could see a tiny crack of light at the bottom. He rapped hard on the wood. In the silence, it sounded bullying. But she knew his knock.

"Please, Luke." Her voice, so weary. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk. Not now."

Luke's pride was too far gone for that; it was as if there was a sinking ship at the center of his soul. "I'll stand out here till morning if you don't talk to me." And then, "*Please, Ella.*"

And at last the door opened. Gisèle had undressed and was softer in her silk robe, her hair in waves down her back and shiny from brushing. But her face was drawn, her eyes cold and stricken. She turned away from him when she spoke, and her voice was ragged. "You must despise me."

And he couldn't then, the way she said it; she crept under his skin. He followed her into the room. "I don't despise you... I just don't understand. You— your own *father.*" No, he couldn't go that route. "Listen. It's Tristan's fault, for god's sake, not *yours.*"

If she'd only agreed, collapsed into tears, asked his forgiveness, told him how horrible it had been and begged him to take her away. Asked him anything, but what she asked. "How long have you been having an affair?"

He doubted his ears. It was like complaining of sniffles during a holocaust. What was an affair to incest? But she went to her writing desk and retrieved a photograph. Turning, she held it out to him. He didn't need to see it; he took it robotically. To do something with his hands. He and Amanda were walking together, up Pike Street, from the look of it. He was laughing; so was she. And for a moment, Luke was overwhelmed with the desire to be there with her, instead of here, to be anywhere but here. It made him see red. "Is this a contest? Which of us is the bigger sinner?" His voice sounded like a stranger's, a stranger he couldn't control. "Incest trumps adultery, I think."

Gisèle flinched; she didn't want to talk about that. And so they wouldn't? He felt the rage building inside, waves of heat that consumed him.

“What is she like?” Her voice broke on the words. “Amanda? Or, does she go by Mandy?”

Mandy. But only with him. “I don’t want to talk about her. It’s not fucking *about* her.”

She flinched; the word was too coarse for her. The act. “I’m not angry with you, Luke.”

“That’s big of you.”

This hurt her. He wanted to hurt her. She said, softly, “She’s so beautiful...”

“Is she? She reminded me of you.”

And for a moment the light in her eyes gave him hope. Even then. The anger ebbed away.

That was the power Gisèle had over him, even when he hated her. She was his redemption; in an instant she could wash him clean. Or not.

“How did you meet?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Marc introduced us, through a mutual friend at the university. Her professor. What does it matter? It doesn’t fucking matter. He was in the city, we met up. What does it matter?”

“I see.” She closed her eyes; her breath was uneven. “Does Robin know about her, too?”

“No, Gisèle. I haven’t done anything to embarrass you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Nobody knows except Marc, and he said he wouldn’t tell anyone. She’s never been to Devon. She doesn’t even know my real name. It was all very discreet.” He laughed. “Look who I’m talking to about discreet? All these years, right under my nose, and I never suspected a *goddamned* thing—”

Gisèle frowned. She spoke very quietly, and something in her restraint enraged Luke even more. “You have the paintings, Luke. Take them and go away. Please. Sell them, do whatever you like with them. But if you see Amanda again, I’ll come out with the truth. You can’t see her again. Promise me.” Her voice softened. “It’s not jealousy. I know it’s been over between us for a long time. It’s just... her. I can’t explain.” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry.”

But it wasn’t sorry for the garden, for the kiss, for all the lies. It was: *Sorry, I don’t love you*. Luke would forever remember her expression: reflective, full of pity and sorrow, one who spins mirages and yet not without feeling for the madman who raves.

And then he knew she must actually *love* Tristan. She didn't even try to apologize for it. Luke saw it all so clearly then: he had been nothing more than a façade of respectability, a red herring, a prop for the audience. Is that why she was so worried about this affair? People might begin to see that he'd only played husband to Gisèle and father to Nicola, when *all* this time—

Gisèle stood very still, inviolate as a sculpture, her washed face an unblemished ivory and her robe wrapped tightly around her, so chaste. And Luke wanted the woman in the cellar, the woman of the paintings. Tristan's Gisèle. He wanted in.

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LATE the next morning, consciousness penetrated the hazy residue of Nicola's dreams in a single slash. Her eyes fluttered open and light splashed through the window onto her bedspread, washing her in its glare and making the night before the stuff of nightmares. Dimly, she remembered getting out of bed to go to her mother, but she hadn't been able to talk to her. Through the door, she'd heard her parents arguing in voices too low to hear and she'd retreated back to bed. At three-thirty, unable to sleep, she'd risen again, and from her bathroom window she had seen her father's tall lanky form striding through the glass corridor back from the pool house. He must have gone out to his paintings.

She blinked now, and the images receded. Everything would be all right. It had been stupid to lock her mother out last night. Without even pausing to brush her hair, she slid out of bed and padded down the hall to Gisèle's room, rapping softly on the heavy wooden door. "Mom?"

There was no answer, but the door was ajar. Nicola pushed it gently inward: the room was neat and ordered, the down comforter in perfect square tufts beneath the duvet, the cherry wood sleigh bed polished and gleaming in the clean morning sun; the stone fireplace stood in the corner, its iron grate cold and dark. Nicola sniffed. There was a funny, too-sweet scent in the air. The window was shut and outside it was autumn cool, yet inside there was the scent of honeysuckle on a still summer day; cloying fruit... flowers.

It was perfume, her mother's favorite: *Paris*, it was called. *Yves St. Laurent*. She saw it lying on its side on the carpet; the lid off and an oblong stain beneath the bottle, the color of apricots.

"Mom?" Nicola walked through the room to the bathroom, but it too, stood dark. There were traces of water around the drain in the bathtub, but nothing more.

Funny. Her mother never took a bath in the morning. A towel, folded on the marble ledge, was hardly damp. A mug sat beside it, empty.

Nicola went back into the bedroom. Her eyes traveled over the great armoire and sturdy chest of drawers, writing desk and bureau, all dusted and tidy and beyond reproach. Even the vanity table was pristine, holding none of the clutter of the night before. But there was something wrong with the mirror. Nicola couldn't see her reflection.

The vanity mirror was a triptych: the wide central portion bolted securely to the wall and flanked by two narrow mirrored panels on each side. She'd never realized these could be closed to reveal an intricate carving in cherry wood: three bouquets tied loosely with ribbon. Her mother had never closed them before. There was something eerie about it, something final. The room itself felt utterly vacant. Alarms went off in Nicola's mind; had her mother gone away without her?

She ran to her father's room. When he came to the door, rumpled and grumpy, she could not tell him why she was crying. She simply pulled him down the hall to her mother's empty bedroom, pointing out the perfume-soaked carpet and the covered mirror. "She never closes it—"

"Maybe she couldn't stand her own reflection."

She stared at him. "Her bed's not even slept in. I think she's gone away."

Her father's voice was hoarse. "For God's sake, Nic, your mother wouldn't go away without telling you. There's nothing to get so upset about. A little spilled perfume...."

"Well, where is she then? It doesn't look like she's been here since last night. And something happened last night—" She broke off and stared at her father, begging him to contradict her, to make it better. "Didn't it?" *You were in the garden, too*, her eyes said. *You saw. Too.*

Luke sighed. He looked peaked and haggard, his hair sticking up in awkward angles like an octagon. “What do you *think* happened, Nicky?”

“I-I don’t know. I didn’t see anything, really,” she lied. “Only Mom was so upset, and you looked angry.” She stared at her father. “And I thought I saw her... kiss someone.”

Her father inhaled sharply. “It wasn’t that kind of a kiss. It was only your grandfather she was talking to. It was just a fatherly kiss. In the dark, you couldn’t see.”

“But Mom yelled at me, and she never yells.” Fresh tears stung her eyes.

“You weren’t supposed to be up.”

“Is that all?” *I don’t believe you.* “What’s wrong with everyone, lately?”

Luke rubbed his eyes hard with his forefinger and thumb. “We had a sort of argument last night, that’s all. It didn’t have anything to do with what happened in the garden.”

“Are you going to get a divorce?”

He sighed heavily. “I don’t know, Nicky. I don’t want you to worry about it.”

The more he told her not to worry, the more worried she became. “We have to find her, Dad. She tried to talk to me last night, and I— I just have to talk to her.” *She has to tell me. She has to tell me it was a fatherly kiss, not you.*

Her father said gently, “Well, we can’t go beating on doors. She might be downstairs already. We’ll go see, huh?” He reached for her hand. “Did you have a bad dream, or something?”

Nicola simply nodded, wiping the tears from her cheeks. She was ashamed of them; she never cried.

Downstairs, Maggie was disposing of the last remnants of the party. She hadn’t seen her mother all morning: “She’ll be sleeping in, hon, surely...” But she’s *not*. A sensible shrug: “I don’t know then, dear.” Henri hadn’t seen or heard her since the night before. Mrs. Pengilly had set up the breakfast buffet and then left to run errands in town. The kitchen was empty, spotlessly gleaming; the buffet was untouched. None of the cars were missing, but hers.

Grand-père came down in his robe. He looked a little sleepy, but otherwise just the same as always. Nicola gazed at him and her tongue turned to mush. In daylight, it was hard to imagine him as he'd seemed last night. It was *impossible* to imagine. He smiled his normal smile at Nicola, and she tried to return it. "*Mon chaton*," he said, peering down at her. "Have you been crying?"

"Have you seen Mom, Grand-père? She didn't sleep in her room last night."

Tristan raised a brow, but his expression was not terribly concerned. "Well, she'll be in the cabana, I imagine, by the pool. That's the only place she could go. The other rooms are full."

"Well," her father said darkly, "We should have known to come to you first."

"*Mais oui*." Tristan turned and plucked a grape from a fruit platter on the sideboard. His voice sounded strangely distant. "The house must have gotten too cramped for her."

But Nicola hardly heard; flooded with relief, she ran to the door, was outside. The morning air was chill on her skin, a reminder that she was still wearing only pajamas and slippers. Dew soaked her feet and she slipped on the wet grass as she ran across the lawn to the nearest entrance to the pool house. Behind her, she heard her name but kept running until she reached the French doors. Through the glass, she could see that the paintings were still set up, a ghostly audience of draped easels gathered around the spectacle of the pool. Nicola was surprised; she'd thought her father had come out to put them away. Humidity wasn't good for paintings.

She stepped inside. The door to the cabana was to her right, and the vast pool lay sparkling before her. Sunlight shone through the skylights above and the smooth clear water was gently rippling. And then she stopped short.

From here the edge of her mother's scarlet robe looked like a dropped handkerchief in the water, or a great streak of blood. There were no rational thoughts: *Why would her robe be in the water?* There were no thoughts at all. Nicola's stomach clenched into a tight coil, twisting tighter and tighter. "Mom?!" Nicola's voice rose, but it was still a question: *Mom?* Behind her, she heard steps. Her father, her grandfather.

“Mon Dieu—”

“Nicola, stop!”

But she'd flown mindlessly across the flagstones to the pool. A deafening roar rose in her ears. The world tilted and then she was wet in the water, struggling with her mother's slight weight; Gisèle's dark hair spread and covered her face. Nicola tried to lift her, but she slipped in her arms; she was so very heavy. Her head fell back and her eyes— her mother's warm, familiar, dancing eyes— were fixed and staring, horribly still.

Nicola came up screaming. Her father and grandfather were in the water, pulling her back, forcing her out of the pool. *No, let me go! Mom?? Mom!* But she couldn't fight them, and her throat constricted so that her cries were no more than a sobbing hiccup, an absence of sound, her thoughts black and still, an endless downward tumult.

Robin was there before the police. Marc, too. They were coming across the hill as Nicola was led away. Who led her? Maggie, Henri. Over her shoulder, she saw the four men grouped by the pool, talking with their hands, their voices indiscernible. Inside the house, it was chaos, confusion, whispers. Strangers stared at her as she was led past, still dripping wet. A doctor came, and all the whispers in the house faded, all the noise in her head was compressed, forced down, down, like the sound underwater: tinny and distorted.

Marco... Polo. Like the children's game. *Marco...* Not real. *Polo.* Nicola heard noises fade in and fade out, and hid there under the clear blue water. She imagined her mother was there with her, and like her, just fine. Just playing. *Marco... Polo.*

But she knew it wasn't true. And she did not want to come up again.

VII—Psyche



— *Berthe Morisot, 1876*

I FELT the change in the car when she woke. It was the awful tension before a baby begins to bawl, or a dog realizes you're a stranger. Karen watched me through bleary eyes and I felt the hair stand up on my arms. She said nothing; she pulled the fleece blanket tight around her and burrowed into the soft folds.

"You've been asleep such a long time, ma petite, are you all right?"

"I don't think so," she murmured. "I—I feel kind of funny."

"That's natural, chérie. It's only nerves."

"No," She sat up quickly. "I feel sick."

I pulled over. She was indeed very sick. "Poor darling." I stroked her forehead; her hair was slick with perspiration and curled in ringlets. "It's all right, it's only carsickness." I spoke in soothing tones, though my heart pounded erratically. "We're over the state line now. We're stopping just ahead."

I'd chosen Oregon over Nevada. I had no taste for the desert and hoped the greater distance from San Francisco would decrease the likelihood of news alerts. We entered Ashland, just across the southern border, a charming town famed for its Shakespearean festival, it seemed, but we wouldn't be taking in any theatre. I'd selected a rambling inn that featured private cottages. Night was falling as I checked in and I left Karen in the car, safely cloaked in darkness. Inside, I chatted with the clerk, but declined the bell-boy.

As I switched on the lights in our room, I could see she was still a bit green. I kissed the top of the head. "How are you feeling, ma petite? It is good to be still, n'est-ce pas? We won't drive so far tomorrow."

"I just want to take a bath. Where's my bag?"

I frowned, turning. "I'm afraid I had to get rid of your bag, Karen. While you were sleeping."

Her voice rose a little shrilly. "Got rid of it?"

"You have to understand. If I were pulled over for any reason—" I inhaled deeply. "I'm sorry, chérie, but you were sleeping and I didn't want to wake you."

Her eyes were dilated, from the drug or from fear. "But what if it's found?"

I didn't answer. I wanted it all to dawn on her, what would be thought if her things were found in a dumpster. It would make it easier, eventually, to tell her the truth.

"Well, I don't have anything with me," she said, at last. "Not even a toothbrush."

Had I overlooked that? "You didn't put a toothbrush in the bag, did you, Karen?" I asked, tersely.

"Anything that would imply an overnight stay?"

"No," she said, equally irritable. "You told me not to bring anything, and I didn't. I thought we'd stop somewhere today. I just had gym clothes and makeup—" She stared at the floor. "A few of my stories."

Relieved, I said in a gentle voice, "I didn't know that, ma petite. I'm sorry. I'll take you shopping as soon as we're far enough away, I promise. Naturally, I picked you up a few things till then."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

She looked very fragile, very pale, as she contemplated me. "What did you get?"

"Everything." I smiled. "Did you think all this luggage was mine?"

She gazed dazedly at the bags in the corner, and her glassy eyes brightened.

I'd taken great pleasure in shopping for her and as she opened the suitcase, she let out a cry of delight. I'd purchased clothing from the best department stores: shades that suited her and styles I wished to see her in, but also suited to her taste. I didn't want her to feel I was trying to make her over too soon. I'd studied her so well that the sizes were correct, down to the shoes. I'd also bought underclothes and silk pajamas sprinkled with tiny yellow daisies. There is something very cheerful about daisies.

Marriage to Sabina taught me the lengths women went to, and I'd packed all the essential toiletries into a cosmetic case: toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush and comb, hairpins, a makeup remover and facial cleanser, a good shampoo and a conditioner made for her curls. Even in the finest hotels, they seem to find it impossible to acquire a decent shampoo. I'd even bought her feminine products; how was one to know when the need would arise? I didn't want her discomfited. The make-up, too, was carefully chosen. Sabina had

refused to wear anything but Lancôme, and the saleswoman at the counter took great advantage of my zeal, helping me with the usual array of powders and lipsticks as well as a tremendous lot of compacts and creams. Karen examined several of the items quizzically. She was only fifteen, after all. But she was enchanted with it all, her semi-drugged depression turned to Christmas morning glee. Money has the wonderful easy faculty of smoothing things over.

And so I took my first easy breath of the day as Karen took her bath. What a thrill to hear her splashing about behind the door; I had even thought of bath oil, imagining the lavender scent on her skin. She emerged quite relaxed and feeling, by design, very pampered. I ordered pizza—hardly haute cuisine, but her favorite—and we ate a late supper in the room. We had a little wine, which proved charming as she was unused to it and began to giggle a great deal. She had never touched a drop of alcohol before, can you imagine? For a Frenchman such a thing is inconceivable, and even for an American teenager she seemed singularly devoid of vice. To this observation she retorted indignantly that she'd smoked an entire cigarette, "Once, at summer camp." But then she paused, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "It tasted awful."

And yet there was something false in all her good cheer. We avoided all mention of San Francisco, her family, her backpack, her future. We talked about airy things and practical ones: weather, the surrounding area, the long trip ahead. We could stop anywhere she liked on the way to New York, I said. Not only could we, I thought; we must. By the time we reached New York, I had to be very sure of her.

At last we retired to our twin beds, (very chaste, you see), to sleep.

Sometime in the night I awoke to the drumming of rain on the roof, and soft muffled sobs. I fought the urge to comfort her; yet, I was a violin she was born to play. I listened, hardly breathing, until her crying at last diminished and stopped. I knew I had to let her leave her way as well as mine.

The next day, I grew more concerned. Karen insisted a little hysterically that we stay in Ashland. "I don't want to drive today, Jacques. Can't we just stay here? Please."

It was impossible, of course. Until her bag was found, it would be thought she'd been kidnapped; the FBI might be called in, the borders alerted, her picture plastered all over the news. Such a furor was rare in 1979, when milk cartons had yet to carry anything to interfere with one's wholesome hearty breakfast, but I couldn't take the chance. "I'm sorry, ma petite. We should get back on the road, I think."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Why do you call me that? I don't even know what it means."

I was startled. "I— oh. Well, it's not really translatable, Karen. It's just affectionate. My little darling." My precious little one. "I will stop if you don't like it." Could I stop? I wondered.

"It's okay," she said, grudgingly. "I kind of like it." She turned away from me, her gaze raking over the drawn curtains on the windows, a pent-up kitten with aspirations for the outdoors. "There's just a lot I haven't thought about. Like my name. I can't go by my real name anymore, can I?"

"Oui, I've thought of that." I tried not to pace. I hadn't thought we would have to face this particular issue quite yet, but there was nothing to do. "It's a simple process, Karen. It'll be fun to become someone else. That's what you want, isn't it?" I returned her stare with my most charming smile. "Do you remember I told you I had a daughter who would have been about your age?"

"Yes. She died—"

"Oui. She was just three." I fidgeted with the handkerchief in my pocket. A bad habit. I balled it in my hand, clenching and unclenching it. "When were you born, ma petite?"

"February twenty-fifth," she said, softly. "1964."

"There, you see. My daughter was a little younger; she would have turned fifteen on June third, but I have her birth certificate and her social security number—"

Her stare turned stony. "I don't understand. I don't want to be your daughter."

"Listen to me. You can't apply for a license or an ID or a passport in your name. You understand that. In France, my daughter is dead. She died there. But she was born while I was in college at Princeton. She has dual citizenship, you see, and the records here are non à jour... er, that is to say, not up-to-date."

“How do you know the records are ‘non à jour?’” She spoke calmly enough, imitating my accent, but I thought I detected a faint note of hysteria. “Have you tried this before?”

“Of course not.” I shrugged. “My American tax attorney wasn’t aware of the accident. My taxes are rather complicated; I wasn’t aware he’d continued to declare her. When I became aware, it was a painful matter I never bothered to rectify.”

“My dad used to say the tax write-off was the only reason to have children.”

“Nice fellow.” I held her eyes. “I do not wish to be your father, Karen.” I gave a brittle laugh. “It’s a disguise, ma petite, like a hat or a moustache. It’s a game. Our game. Come.” She didn’t turn. “Come.”
And at last she came to me.

We left the town of Ashland and drove north to the Columbia River, where I distracted her with the wonders of the river gorge. I was nervous and we scarcely left the car, finally crossing the river into Washington. Off of Interstate 5 there is a bland town called Centralia where I found a big bland corporate hotel. We ate a room service dinner over desultory conversation. Karen’s sparkle had gone and so had her appetite; as she ate, she often tipped her head as if listening for something. There was nothing to hear.

At last, we slept. Or rather, I slept—for I awoke bleary-eyed to find Karen’s bed empty. Tripping out of bed, I found her fully dressed and a few steps from the door.

Half-awake and not certain I wasn’t dreaming, I grabbed her and dragged her through the sitting room to the bedroom and threw her onto her bed. She squirmed under my weight, her breath coming fast and shallow. I held her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I whispered, furiously.

Her irises were no more than tiny rings around the dilated pupils; she said nothing.

“You’re being a stupid child, Karen. “I gave you credit for more guts than this. More brains—”

“If I’m such a child, what are you doing with me?” The precocious little imp. She writhed beneath me. “Let me go! I’m leaving.”

I raised myself above her, supporting myself on my palms and looking down. “No, you’re not.” She squirmed, but I had her hips pinned between my knees.

“You’re a liar,” she whispered, fiercely. “You gave me something yesterday. That’s why I slept so long, and got sick.” Wriggling, she managed to push up her sleeve. “You injected me with something. Look at that.” I had expected a few tiny pinpricks, but she was such a tiny thing her vein was purplish-green with bruising. “I saw it in the bath, and I’ve been pretending since then. I wasn’t carsick; I never get carsick.” She clenched her hands into tiny fists, and beat against me. I grabbed her wrists, and her eyes swam with helpless tears. “Why did you do this to me?”

“What did I do to you, chérie? What exactly have I done to you?”

She sobbed, “You must’ve known I’d change my mind or you wouldn’t have doped me up.”

I took a deep breath, rolling over and sitting on the bed beside her. “You haven’t committed any crime, Karen, I have. Do you understand that? I’ve invested in you, just as I said I would. I wanted to do it and I don’t regret it.” I swallowed. “But now there is only one thing in the world neither of us can do. I can’t change my mind,” I said, quietly. “And neither can you.”

“You can’t keep me a prisoner here. I want to go.”

“Go where?”

“I’ll go to my aunt’s. I’ll take the bus to Se—Seattle.”

“Will you? With what?”

Her eyes darted to the chair in the corner where I’d laid my slacks, a pocket of which held a money clip. It was a tiny unconscious gesture that let me know everything. The little minx. “Don’t make me tell on you, Jacques.” She had the temerity to say this. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have led you on—”

“Have you led me on?” I asked. I held her down and kissed her, not gently like before, but hard, and I could taste her distrust on my tongue. But after some moments, she stopped struggling and she clung to me. I pulled away then to look at her; her mouth open and hair mussed, eyes wide and bewildered.

I knew it wasn't me who bewildered her, but herself.

I reached for the robe I'd left lying across my bed, and pulled the belt from its loops; she swallowed hard and sat up, but I forced her down again.

"What are you going to do?"

"Put you to bed."

She squirmed and tried to kick me.

"I'm sorry for this, Karen, but how can I possibly trust you now?" I wasn't thinking very clearly. Was this real, or only a game? It was, of course, both. I wrapped the belt around her wrists, and tied it. She opened her mouth to scream; I slapped my hand over her mouth. "If you scream, I'll gag you."

She did scream, of course.

It was only a muffled sound against my hand; she couldn't open her mouth wide enough to bite my palm and so wriggled violently and kicked instead. In the end I grew tired and annoyed and did gag her. Then I tied her feet. Her eyes were wide and still so dilated it seemed they'd stay that way permanently and looking at her bound on the bed, it was like something someone else had done, not me. I was civilized.

I lay beside her on the bed. I explained what I'd done with her bag and with her, while she was drugged. I explained to her that she was 'dead.' The timing could not have been much worse, but was unlikely to get better. I told her she wasn't going back: not now, not ever. Her family would mourn her and recover. She would have a new identity. She would have a new life. She would have me, and the life I wished to give her. My voice grew stronger in the telling, more certain; she was utterly motionless.

I said, at last, "I want us to be as we were. The trouble is you haven't learned how to be free. But I will teach you. I will teach you everything." She did not seem to blink. "Do you know what would happen if you went back? You'd settle back in and within a week be dreaming of escape. You know it as well as I do, ma chère fille. You see, I know you. I know you better than you know yourself."

A tear rolled down her cheek. I wiped it tenderly away.

I told her stories then, slanting them to suit my aims. I seem to remember the tale of Cupid's abduction of Psyche. Others of that ilk. I spoke endlessly, softly, like a perverse lullaby. But her eyes did not close. At last I said, "I have something to relax you now, Karen. so you can sleep. It won't make you sick, I promise. You'll just slip into a nice sleep. Wouldn't you like to sleep?"

And she closed her eyes, as if to say yes.

Though I had a number of sedatives that could be taken orally or injected, depending on her mood, I was flooded with relief. I didn't want to force her. "In the morning, things will be different. I'm going to take the gag out now, so you can swallow the pill with water. Can I trust you not to scream?"

She nodded.

The "gag" was merely a clean handkerchief of mine. I removed it and eased her up; she opened her mouth for the pill I offered her and drank when I lifted the water glass to her lips. Her helplessness was touching, so very intimate and touching that I drank it in as she drank, and then rested her head back on the pillow. I tucked her in. She closed her eyes gratefully, then, as if shutting a door. But I remained beside her, watching until her lashes were still and breathing rhythmic; I took the spare blanket from the closet and covered her. As I did so, she rolled over, reaching instinctively for the pillow with her bound wrists, her dark hair spread across the starched white. Gently, I untied her wrists. She was no threat, anymore; she murmured something in a dream. I heard, "Jacques."

"Sshh..." I murmured, kissing her on the mouth and then lightly on the cheek, where I could still taste the dried salt of her tears.

I woke just after dawn. The sash of my robe lay twisted on the floor like a snake, and my handkerchief was a ball on the bedside table. It was a startling sight in daylight. Karen didn't stir as I gazed down at her. She didn't wake until noon. I had lunch sent up, and was rearranging the furniture, moving a table and chairs by the window. When I turned, she was sitting up straight in bed.

“Are you hungry?”

She swallowed. “My mouth is dry.”

“Would you like iced tea? Or there are soft drinks in the mini-bar—”

“Just water.”

I got her water. She gazed at me over the glass as she sipped.

“I ordered sandwiches,” I said, making my voice as pleasant as possible, my tone as normal as possible. I’d stored away her bindings, placing them at easy reach beneath the bed. I didn’t know if she’d be tempted to replay the night before, but sadly I could no longer trust her.

Karen yawned and stretched and went into the restroom. When she reemerged, she’d combed her hair. She chose a 7-Up from the mini-bar, sat down and said politely, “This looks very good. Thank you.” She wore an expression of wary appraisal, as a rational person might regard a madman. I didn’t care for it.

“Typically I prefer to dine out,” I said. “We’ll do a good deal of that in New York.”

She said nothing. And neither, anymore, did I.

Early evening became late evening, and then night again. We used the drone of the television to avoid speaking. Oddly I did not feel caged in; on the contrary, I felt infinitely patient, as Ahab must have been content to stare out to sea. But bedtime presented challenges. I said to her, “Shall we make a plan?”

Her laugh was harsh, and a little off pitch. “What’s your plan? To keep feeding me drugs till I turn into a vegetable?”

“If necessary,” I said coldly. “You’re not exactly living up to your part of the bargain.”

“How do you expect me to feel, Jacques? Seeing as how I’ve been murdered—”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I haven’t murdered you. I’ve set you free. Do you think they’d ever stop looking for you otherwise? Do you think they would ever forgive you?”

This was quite cruel, but effective. The silence was audible.

Finally, she said, "Well, they won't believe it. They won't believe I'm dead."

"Whyever not?"

"I wrote about you."

A diary? I stared. A diary. My mind spun. Could she have been so foolish? But of course she could have. She was fifteen. Did it matter, in the end? I kept my voice calm. "Really?"

"It's good for a writer to keep a journal."

I reclined on the bed and studied the popcorn ceiling. "You left it for them to find?"

"Yes."

I scratched my head. "Then it's rather a good thing I didn't tell you my real name, n'est-ce pas?"

We sat a moment in silence, on our separate beds, split by an end table and a too-large brass lamp that made it impossible to gauge how much the other was lying. I had the advantage. I was telling the truth, of course, and in light of it, it didn't matter whether she was or not— whether she had written about me or not. In a moment, she comprehended this, and it made her furious.

"I'm not going to be very much fun, Jacques. Or whatever your name is." She spat out the words.

"I don't want anything to do with you and you can't keep me drugged all the time. It'll attract attention, don't you think? A middle-aged man carting a stoned teenager through the lobby?"

"We'll stay in."

"The maids—"

"The reason for the sign on the door, chérie. I'll get us fresh towels when I pass them in the hall."

Her voice rose. "When you pass them."

"Clearly, you can't be trusted to go out. And yet, I do hate a cluttered hotel room. I dislike unmade beds. Perhaps I'll drug you and we'll sit on the terrace while they make up the room. I'll say you're ill."

"Why are you doing this to me?" She began to yell, and I rose from my bed. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Do you think one day I'll call you Daddy? Do you think I'll fu—"

I slapped her across the face. Not hard. But I'm ashamed to say I enjoyed the effect it had, the rush of red to her cheek, the stunned silence. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Calm down." I told her sharply. "Do you hear me, Karen? I want you to calm down."

I felt her fear flood through the room and settle there like a low fog, curling at my ankles. She pushed herself back against the flimsy headboard, and gone was all the confidence. She sounded like a little girl. She murmured. "Are you going to... rape me?"

"No," I replied. "I'm going to give you everything you ever wanted in your life, and I'm going to worship you from afar. If you're good."

"And if I'm not?"

"We'll do this forever."

"I hate you!"

"I don't think you do."

And she didn't hate me, you see. I could see it all the time in her face; along with the fear lay attraction. Ours is a marvelously shallow society. Had I looked like Quasimodo or worn dirty clothes and smelled, she might have hated me. As it was, she was growing to love me. Once attracted, we are far more drawn to things the harder time they give us. By this time, I was quite overwhelmed with love for her.

"You're a monster."

"You make me a monster, Karen, but I'll tell you a secret..." I leaned down; my lips brushed her ear. "You can make me anything you like."

She didn't move; I stood. Arms curled around her knees, she fixed me with a glassy stare. So I left her alone in the bedroom, and went into the sitting room of our suite. I opened the mini-bar and poured myself a scotch, neat. There was no door she could close, and she would have to pass me to leave. Earlier, as she slept, I'd unplugged the phone beside the bed. I found a perverse pleasure in keeping her there. Oh, I had all the proper emotions; I was nervous, anxious, even guilty— not for taking her, you understand, but for

tormenting her— and yet I would not be honest if I didn't admit also to a very poignant triumph. I had captured what I loved. I would keep her. She was mine.

And so you see, what I told her was not true. I was a monster. This I knew.

We spent two weeks in that hotel. I had her drugged nearly all the time, not unconscious, but floating in a haze of artificial well-being. You think this cruel, but she was to tell me it was one of the most restful periods of her life. I swear this. When I asked her why, she replied, "It was nice not to have to think." In her short life she'd had more than her share of cares. Can you see that I felt I was doing something almost benevolent? Smudging her leaden memory and leaving her a new blank page to write on.

Eventually I trusted her to be quiet as we left the hotel. It was to be a symbolic victory. I would not drug her; she would leave with me willingly.

It was the first day of May, and poetically, the very day the discovery of her backpack was reported in the San Francisco papers. I'd been scanning the Chronicle each day for news of her. It had been sparse, but enough to make my blood run cold: there had been reported sightings of her and a few contradictory sightings of me. There was an encouraging discussion of the epidemic of runaways in the city. And then, at last: the discovery of the bloody backpack that brought a tragic end to the search for Karen Miller.

I did not tell Karen. As it was, the morning didn't start out well. She refused breakfast, refused my attempts at conversation. She didn't put on make-up or wash her hair; she pulled it back in an unruly ponytail and wore her new clothes in an unfortunate way. I decided clashing colors were inadequate cause for alarm— half of America is discordant to my eye— and so we left the room at last. I'd already arranged the bill with the front desk; we had only to walk through the lobby to the car. There was no doorman, no valet. I carried our suitcases. Damned heavy they were, too. She toted her cosmetic case. We made it across the expanse of the lobby without mishap. The automatic glass doors slid open wide, and we both inhaled at the shock of fresh air. She had uttered not a single word.

In the car my uneasiness was replaced with a foreign sensation: I glanced at her profile beside me in the car, and with a startled pang, took in the unwashed hair and the pallor of her skin. Her attempts to appear unalluring troubled me. It was the tactic she'd tried with her father, I recalled: concealing herself in oversized sweatshirts and jeans. In the glare of sunlight, we were awash in reality, and it wasn't glamorous or reassuring. I was flooded with panic, like an actor who has suddenly forgotten his lines.

But I drove, and as we drove something miraculous happened. I don't know if it was the beauty of the Pacific Northwest, with its towering evergreens and raging rivers, or the sudden tangibility of our freedom— but her mood shifted. I stopped at a music store and let her assault my ears with Blondie and the Bee-Gees. John Lennon was her favorite and we listened to "Imagine" more times than I care to imagine again. And snacking on French fries, she said suddenly, "The thing is I like it better when it's my idea, too. Something we're doing together. I don't like it when you try to run everything."

I tried not to laugh. "I can understand that."

"I'm not a little girl, Jacq—er... whatever your name is," she said. "Let's just pretend we're starting over, okay? We're starting now."

"All right." I matched her serious tone. But the incongruity struck me, the touching little irony: "I'm not a little girl," followed by, "Let's pretend." Oui, ma petite. Let's pretend, let's pretend, let's pretend.

She curled up on the car seat, curving her legs beneath her. "What was your daughter's name?"

I cleared my throat. "The truth is, she wasn't my daughter. Not technically. Sabina and I were friends; French students at Princeton, of similar backgrounds. Her family would have disowned her if they knew she was pregnant. She was more Catholic than not. An abortion was out of the question."

"You mean the baby wasn't yours, and you married her anyway?" She blinked. "You must have loved her very much."

"Not really. I liked the way she looked."

Karen bit her lip. "Do I remind you of her?" As the words came out, she seemed to realize she'd gone to great lengths to make herself unattractive today. She smoothed the unruly curls that had escaped her ponytail, though in truth, it hardly mattered to me. Without make-up her skin was pale and her lips full but faded; her eyes had a smudged, bruised quality that made her look very vulnerable and lost.

"Not a bit," I replied. "She was blonde and Brigitte Bardot-like. While we were married she made plenty of friends."

"Do you mean," her voice actually dropped, "Lovers? Didn't that bother you?"

I shook my head. In truth, I'd had Sabina describe her encounters to me, detailed settings and sensations, but I couldn't say so to Karen. "I did not love her, you see? I didn't believe in love then."

She squirmed in her seat to look at me. A flush appeared on her cheek. "I didn't really write about you in my diary. I don't even keep a diary. I tried once, but I wasn't any good at it. It felt so phony. I was just bored in Geometry and wrote my name with yours."

"Mrs. Jacques Barnard?"

She made her voice cool. "I don't imagine that's enough to make them look for you. And anyway, it's probably soaked in blood." But she didn't sound sorry, suddenly. "What name should I have written?"

She was asking me to trust her. I weighed it, and said at last, "Tristan. Tristan Mourault."

"Oh! I like that much better than Jacques. Jacques is almost too French for a Frenchman." I laughed, as she repeated, "Tristan... And what's my name?"

"Gisèle." Without hesitation. "It was my daughter's middle name, but I chose it. Do you like it?"

"Gisèle." She tasted it, tested it like a fine wine on an undeveloped palette.

"It is more charming when you say it."

She turned, tipping her head to one side, a little doubtfully. "Do I look like a Gisèle?"

"Exactly like."

And she smiled at me.

VIII— Chasing Butterflies



— *Berthe Morisot, 1874*

THE scene of Gisèle Mourault's funeral was a painting drained of color, but for one bright umbrella among the black. No blue broke through the marbled sky, and no light shone on the somber party in the cemetery on the hill. Even the vast gray pearl of Lake Devon was subdued, emptied of sailboats, its shimmering surface pitted with raindrops.

Nicola would remember most the sound of it; alternately blaring and diffuse, as though the normal threshold had arced wildly out of control, up to a piercing crescendo and down to a tepid whisper. One moment she was deafened by the brush of great-aunt Eleanor's black silk taffeta and the swish of men's trousers, the next there was no more than a low frequency murmur all around her, the minister's mouth moving up and down without making any intelligible sound. His words seemed to emanate from inside her head: *From dust we are made, to dust we shall return.* Words that were the stuff of cinema: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

The wind blew round and round, and the raindrops stung her skin. Dimly, Nicola heard the minister ask if anyone had last words to offer. Her godfather, Robin, stepped forward: the one bright umbrella, his. He wore black because he typically wore black, but he didn't feel death was to be mourned. Even the minister eyed him skeptically, Nicola thought.

Coat and scarf billowing with a flurry of autumn leaves, he began to recite:

*"Death is nothing at all
I have only slipped into the next room
I am I and you are you
Whatever we were to each other, we are still.*

The raindrops stung.

*Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow
Laugh as we have always laughed
At the little jokes that we enjoyed together
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.
I am waiting for you, just around the corner.
All is well."*

It was as if he spoke to Nicola alone, his voice resonant and strong, the sharp dark eyes landing on hers, concerned. *All is well?* She wanted to scream, *All is not well, allisnot...*

In the hours after she'd found her mother, she found shock a strangely comforting state; a doctor gave her sedatives that made her feel flattened like a creature on the ocean bottom, weighted by miles of water above. Dreams under sedation are eerie, sluggish things: spurts of luminosity punctuated by deep black holes. But for a while she was buffered by her incomprehension.

She couldn't help feeling that this was the nightmare. Soon she would wake up. Her mother would be there to comfort her. Her mother shouldn't be *here*. None of them should be here.

She glanced around her. The small assembly on the hill represented the only family Nicola had ever known. These were the people who loved her mother most. *And they all know it's a lie*. Her eyes landed on Robin's son, Josh, who stood beside his father, his dark hair streaked with blond and pulled into a ponytail. She'd never seen him in a suit before, but today even his beauty failed to distract her. Slight, dark and elegant, Marc Kreicek was busy examining the cuff of his coat, expressionless and inscrutable as always. Henri stood just beyond, stolid and frowning at the coffin, and Maggie and Mrs. Pengilly were beside him in tears, holding handkerchiefs to their eyes. Rounding out the circle was great-aunt Eleanor, looking like something from an old movie, in a theatrical hat with black veil.

Nicola turned from them to look at her grandfather. Surely, *he* would do something. But he stood motionless beneath an oak tree, as far removed from the small party as he could be. The tree trunk was blackened with rain and he pressed a palm against it, as if for support. Seeing him there made her shudder, made her think of their own English oak in the garden and the night her mother died. *It was just a fatherly kiss*. She could not think of it. He'd tried to comfort her this morning: "We must choose our memories, Nicola. Yours can only be good to you. She loved you most of all."

As she watched, the wind drove rain under his umbrella, into his eyes, like tears.

Her father stood beside her, and Nicola clutched his hand. She couldn't remember when she'd last done that, but he was for her like Grand-père's tree: if she let go, she would fall. And yet when she looked at him her mind was full of questions. Why had her parents argued, and why had her father gone out to the pool house that night? It must have been to see her mother, yet he hadn't seemed to know she was out at the cabana. Her grandfather *had* known. But how? And why had her mother gone? She couldn't stand the water. Everyone knew that. She had a phobia about it. That was worse than not knowing how to swim, she'd once told Nicola. It meant you could never learn.

Her father looked down at her with an anxious frown, and pulled her close. His vivid blue eyes shone with tears that did not fall. Nicola's tears came from a well deep inside. There was no effort in them, just a ceaseless stream down her cheeks that left no sensation at all. The minister was speaking again. *Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts.* But did He? She clenched her eyes shut. *It's all my fault, God... It's my fault she's dead.*

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God to take unto himself the soul of our beloved sister, Marie Gisèle Mourault, here departed, we therefore commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life—

And then it was over. The pallbearers began to lower the coffin inch by inch, and all at once Nicola knew she couldn't let them; she couldn't leave her mother *here*. She didn't belong here. Her father stepped forward, crying silently as he tossed handfuls of dirt into the grave. She tried to tell them, but the words got mangled in her throat, and she began to sob, knowing she couldn't do anything to stop it. She couldn't do anything at all. Her godfather, murmuring words she couldn't hear, gently led her away. Turning, she saw her grandfather standing motionless beneath his oak.

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TWO days after his wife's funeral, Luke Farrell walked into the private investigator's office. Disguised under the demure description: *Personal Inquiries*, it was not the smoky digs of a Philip Marlowe or the seedy back street Mike Hammer variety, but a dainty-curtained Victorian that looked more like a tearoom. But then, of course, there were no seedy back streets in Devon. Preston Murphy was suited to his surroundings, failing in every respect to live up to the burly job description. A fastidious-looking man of slight build, with glasses and flyaway auburn hair, he looked more like a butterfly collector than a detective. He rose. "You must be Luke Farrell."

Luke nodded, and they shook hands. He couldn't help wondering if this unlikely man was the detective Gisèle had follow him in Seattle. If so, his bland expression betrayed nothing.

"Please have a seat."

"First, I... well, what guarantee do I have of your confidentiality?"

"My desire to continue my thriving practice here in Devon?" A reproving smile.

In the end, he had little choice in the matter. Luke sat. "Well, it's a matter of paternity," he said. "I've recently come to believe that my daughter is not mine." Where he was raised, it was rude to come to the point so quickly, particularly this sort of point, but Luke couldn't come up with a polite way to get to it. Preston Murphy only blinked, waiting patiently. "I know there are tests for this sort of thing. Blood tests, but that's no good. She has my blood type, but so do a lot of people; I'm A-positive. My wife, she was A-negative. So's my daughter. I hear there are DNA tests—"

"Yes, there are companies that will do the testing by mail. I can give you the names of several that will process a blood or saliva sample, even hair."

"But from what I understand the hair has to be pulled out by the root, isn't that right?" Luke paused, uncomfortably. "That's possible for my daughter." He'd tried to braid Nicola's hair that morning. "And, of course, it's possible for me. But there's another party involved, and I don't want him to know anything about this."

"And your wife?"

As if he hadn't read the papers. "My wife is dead." Hurriedly, Luke opened the leather satchel he'd brought with him, and extracted several Zip-loc bags. "I've labeled these: this one here: 'A' is hair from my daughter, and 'B:' that's me. For 'C,' I have three bags. I wasn't sure... well, anyhow, I have two cigarette stubs, and this is his coffee cup. And here's his wineglass from last night—" Luke broke abruptly off.

The detective's mild eyes sparked. "He's a member of your household?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"Not to the DNA. It's of personal interest only."

"I thought your interest was professional."

A tip of the head. "My profession is personal inquiry, Mr. Farrell. I always interest myself in the persons involved, and only take those cases that intrigue me. Naturally, my interest is mine alone. Any information I learn with regard to a client is the property of the client." He gazed past Luke through the gauzy curtains.

"Well. 'C' is a member of the household, yes." Luke cleared his throat and steeled his voice. Unemotionally, it came out. "'C' is my father-in-law."

~Seattle, Washington; three days later~

AMANDA Miller was dreaming.

The streets were inky-edged and the scene covered over with a stained haze, as though someone had spilled coffee on the film. She felt rather than recognized the city of her childhood. Somewhere there was drunken laughter and through the fingers of fog, she could make out a warehouse of corrugated steel; a ghostly mint green, it was streaked with rust and faded stenciled lettering.

Inside, the air was heavy and smelled of loamy earth, of mildew and must. The only sound was a relentless grating, like rats gnawing through walls. Turning onto a long hall, she spotted a janitor working alone in the dark. Amanda called out a greeting, but it was as if he hadn't heard her;

whistling cheerfully, he pushed a broad industrial broom, and as she moved closer she could see the object of his work: teeth and fingernails littered the hall. Tufts of dark hair were methodically pushed into a mound, and blood smeared the floor like streaks of oil.

Screaming, she vaulted past him to a door at the end of the hall, a dark rectangle outlined in light. She entered a white cinderblock room. Her sister sat perched on a stool in a gown stained with blood, her head pale and shaved. Her knees were pulled to her chest and she was rocking.

“Karen!” Amanda cried, and relief welled up in her so that she could hardly speak. “Thank God I’ve found you... it’s going to be all right, now.” But the face she met was not her sister’s. The azure eyes were hollow and void, the expression as blank as a figure in an Impressionist watercolor.

The creature tipped its head and spoke in a voice without inflection. “Poor Amanda, it’s too late. Can’t you see that I’m dead? They’re taking me apart now—”

Amanda gasped, choking. She wrestled with the dark until she could hear her own moans and was shuttled forward, funneled through time. Her eyes darted around the small, still apartment, but Karen wasn’t there. *Of course, she isn’t here... she can’t be here.* No one was. It wasn’t San Francisco and Amanda wasn’t nine years old; she’d never be nine again. Her heart was the last to believe; it thudded painfully against her ribcage, unable to distinguish this world from the other.

She rolled out of the damp twisted sheets and tripped to the window, feeling the chill night air on her skin and simply breathing, in: *Don’t be such...* And out: *an idiot.*

It didn’t take a shrink to explain why the nightmares had started again. An innocuous envelope, a single sheet of stationery, and her fragile peace had come to an abrupt end. The letter was without return address, posted two weeks ago from Devon, a resort town in the Cascades Amanda knew only from postcards. It was signed, “Karen.”

She’d contacted Lieutenant Mitchell in San Francisco immediately. His promotions had correlated oddly with their sporadic contact over the years: he’d been the young detective on her

sister's case, and a sergeant when it went cold. Now that he'd made lieutenant, the same disclaimers were delivered without the halting hems and haws, and with a decided air of preoccupation. Yet he'd taken the time to phone her himself with the results of the preliminary forensics: no fingerprints, no DNA; the envelope had been sealed with plain H₂O. He'd never considered the possibility that the letter might be authentic. "It's unusual for anyone to follow such an old crime, Miss Miller, let alone follow *you* to a different city. We may be dealing with someone seriously unstable. Keep your eyes open, huh?"

Even in his chipper businesslike tone, it was a chilling disappointment. "Don't get your hopes up and you won't be disappointed," her aunt would have said. One reason she hadn't mentioned the letter to her aunt. But what had made her believe?

It's me, Mandy. It's Karen. That had been a nice touch; Karen had always called her "Mandy." But then there weren't a lot of alternatives for 'Amanda,' and it would have to be shortened: three syllables were far too formal for a letter from your dead sister.

My god, I am so very sorry for everything. Please believe me, I've thought of you each and every day I've been away. "Been away," as if for a holiday. *I'm not hurt. I'm not dead. How can I begin to explain fifteen years to you in a page?* Amanda thought she could explain it in a sentence: Karen would never have gone fifteen years without writing her, if she'd been able to write. *What a miracle it is to find you again.* Now that was irony for you. *When I think of all the time I've wasted... all the time I might have known you, I'm sick. After all these years, I know this must be overwhelming for you. The truth is I don't know where to begin. I'll try to fill in the pieces a bit at a time, and I hope one day very soon we can meet again. I want so badly to know you, Mandy—for you to know my daughter...* Oh, right. She'd gotten married and had a baby and lived happily ever after. *I wish you could write to me here, but that's impossible for now.* And that is what had gotten to her most: "Write to me here," as if Karen were in a sort of prison. If she *had* survived, and been kept somewhere? Or had amnesia, like some old B-movie. *Please don't share this with anyone. There are no fingerprints, no identifying traces to find, no*

point in trying to find me. Well, at least her pathological pen-pal had been honest about that much. Please let it be enough that I've found you. I never meant to hurt you, Mandy, and I've missed you more than you'll ever know. It's as if I were walking through a dream that was beautiful and terrible and absurd by turns, but now I've woken up. Things are finally coming clear to me, and I have to believe one day you'll understand. I love you more than life.

—Karen

Bravo. Well done. But in the end, “Karen” could be anyone. There were no inside jokes, no references only the two of them would know: no address, no phone number. And in the year after her sister’s murder, there had been many anonymous letters. One had contained nothing but a heart-shaped locket, identical to the one Karen had worn in the school photo that ran in the papers. It caused a flurry of excitement among the detectives who felt it might lead to her killer, and in Amanda, who stubbornly clung to the notion that her sister was alive. But Karen’s locket was discovered in a box of her things, tarnished and hanging from a hook in her jewelry box. There were people who did these things. And there were people, like Amanda, who believed every time.

Growing up, they’d been separated by six years, but little else. Amanda’s earliest memories were dominated by the big sister who told her stories and taught her to read them, how to tell time and how to multiply. When she started school, Karen defended her against the teasing of older boys and scornful glances of girlfriends who didn’t want the kid sister tagging along. She let her play handball with the big kids and pushed her on the swings, let her in on the joke with a wink and slight secretive smile that was theirs alone.

But after grammar school the smiles grew rare, so too the teasing boys and girlfriends. By the age of fourteen Karen stopped having friends over. After school, she was meant to be looking after Mandy, but was rarely there when she came home from ballet. For a year she lied for her. Payment was in ice cream and Tuesdays: the one afternoon a week when things were the way they used to be.

But then one day she hadn't come home at all. Five o'clock came and six went. Seven. Her father got angry; her mother made frantic phone calls. And Amanda walked through the days that followed in a sort of heat haze, in which the air trembled and the world was drawn in sluggish, wavy lines. Through it, there were MISSING! bulletins and candlelight vigils, newspaper people and school psychologists and volunteers gathered around the dining room table; Dad blaming Mom and Mom blaming Dad, and Amanda blaming herself.

Detective Mitchell quizzed her about Karen's friends, home life, habits. Amanda had remarkably little to tell, but she confided that a photograph was missing from Karen's scrapbook. They'd done their scrapbooks together on a rainy Sunday, ransacking their mother's box of family photos for their favorites. Karen's was neat and chronologically ordered, compared to Amanda's haphazard collages. Because of this, Amanda knew which photo was missing: the two of them on the lawn in front of their grandparents' house in Geyserville. But why had she taken it?

It was a question the detectives answered for her. Hadn't Karen told her she was running away? No, Amanda insisted over and over. No. Her mother had been with her and all the while she could feel the pull of her eyes, all her razor-tipped hope clawing at her and so great a temptation to say yes, simply say yes, and somehow save Karen.

The truth was she was beyond saving. By the time the first alarm went off, it was too late. Karen's backpack was discovered three weeks later, gashed with a knife and soaked with her blood. Dumped off the edge of the pier, it had snagged on a ladder descending to the water below. Amanda still saw it in nightmares, though she'd never seen it in life. The few details she'd gleaned were colored in garishly: blood smeared her sister's notebooks; soaked through *Of Mice and Men*, stained her gym clothes— police search units dragged the bay for her body with great hooks. In nightmares they sometimes found her, dead and staring from the water; in sweet dreams they found her on an island, a shiny happy version of Alcatraz, smiling and waving to Amanda. *Here I am! Here I am!*

Details of her death could only be sketched in broad strokes: the presence of the book bag implied a timeline, (Karen had most likely been killed the same day she skipped school), and had probably been the victim of a mugging— no money was found in her wallet— and mercifully, not rape. The extent of blood loss made it clear she'd been killed violently, using the bag to shield herself from her assailant, perhaps after refusing to hand it over. Smears of blood were found on the edge of the pier, indicating that Karen had been disposed of along with the bag, into the bay. The currents from that point would have led her out to sea. Though her body wasn't discovered there was little doubt she was dead, they were told; it was important not to delude oneself in that respect.

And so there had been a funeral, but no resolution. The randomness of the crime made it difficult to investigate. Phone tips led nowhere and dozens of anonymous letters claimed either to have saved Karen or killed her, but Karen was never found and neither was her killer.

Tragedy, her aunt would say, comes in threes. After Karen's funeral, her mother told her quietly that she was leaving her father. A few months later she'd heard her mother arguing with him on the phone in an urgent whisper. Amanda was whisked off to a friend's house for the night, and awakened to a new nightmare. The accident was all over the news: a Chevy Vega had crossed two lanes and crashed into a truck carrying flammable gas. Though the car was charred, Amanda knew before the investigators that her parents were inside. They had died instantly. Newscasters were more concerned that the commute on southbound 101 would be backed up for hours.

And so at the age of ten, Amanda went to live with an aunt and uncle she barely knew in Seattle, had a nervous breakdown and wasn't treated for it. She hid it well; she didn't wish to be treated, to be studied or comforted or advised by strangers. She treated herself, suppressing her memory of the pinched Victorian on the corner until she'd forgotten how it smelled, how it felt beneath her feet and her fingers.

Funny how a few words had brought it all back. And yet for some reason Amanda couldn't explain, she'd asked Detective Mitchell to return the letter. It was the symbolism of it, she supposed, the reason she'd avoided stepping on cracks as a child— not because she really believed she'd break

her mother's back, but because she couldn't let it seem as though she didn't care. She'd avoided cracks for years after her mother died. And for a moment, in that letter, her sister had been alive. So had hope. She wasn't ready to let it die.

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FOR Luke, it had been a grueling few weeks. The good will, the well-intentioned phone calls; it was all beginning to wane, but not Gisèle. At one time he thought he'd grow to hate her, but the chance for that was gone. She was gone forever, and his punishment was to love her still.

He'd tried his best to exorcize her. Just a week after the funeral, in his established motif of misguided moves, he'd paid a visit to Amanda Miller in Seattle. Luke half-expected her to slam the door in his face— he had broken it off abruptly, badly, in August— but it seemed she preferred her men unshaven, haggard and sleep-deprived. The aura of death that clung to him must have been an aphrodisiac for her, and maybe it is true what they say: sex is the only antidote for death. They didn't discuss it, of course. Luke told her half-truths: family troubles, a death in the family. He just failed to detail the family in question.

As he always had, he found old surrogates for new emotions: he told her about his troubled relationship with his father, the death of his mother. Her sympathetic ear and soft touch had soothed his jangled nerves. She was something special, Mandy. Lovely and light— but with dimension. She'd absorbed all his darkness and it scarcely dimmed her. He had the sense that even the truth wouldn't shock her. And it had been so tempting to confide in her, to confide in *someone*. She never talked about her own past. What was her story? He didn't even know, and she didn't know Luke's real name, let alone his real life. There was safety in anonymity. With her, he was almost guiltless.

They'd spent two days together, all of it in bed.

He'd told her he loved her, and he had; he'd lost himself in her— but in the end even the lovely Amanda was tainted by Gisèle's death. For Luke, there was to be no balm in Gilead; he woke to hear Mandy's name on Ella's lips. *You can't see her again. Promise me.* He saw Gisèle reflected in

her eyes, heard her echo in her voice, saw the specter of her profile as she turned. Gisèle was not going to be exorcized so easily.

And as Luke left Seattle, he realized he could never go back. Seized by self-recrimination and a bout of claustrophobia, he had a panic attack on the plane. What had he been thinking? What if he were *still* being watched? *What did it look like to run to your mistress after you'd buried your wife?*

He'd never be able to tell Mandy the truth about his wife, his daughter, and "his" paintings. His truth was all a lie. And so Luke hadn't even called her. After two weeks, she'd phoned him, and his fear made him cruel. In the end he'd said something about having changed his mind. She was better off, he knew, but he'd hated himself for it. Another dollop of guilt; it got lost in the sauce.

Since then, he'd been at loose ends. The exhibition was postponed for a decent interval of indefinite duration, and Preston Murphy had delivered a grim timeline for the DNA results: "eight weeks, best case." In the end, he wasn't even sure he wanted to know.

There was little peace to be found at Falconer's Point. It would be a gross understatement to say his relationship with Tristan was strained. They lived in the same house and rarely ran into one another. When they did, by tacit agreement, they confined themselves to brief inane pleasantries. There were no open accusations; Luke couldn't bring himself to say the word "incest." Because, after all, they might pass in the hall.

The only overt tension had arisen this morning, when Luke had told Tristan he was enrolling Nicola in school: "Surely you can see she needs to get away from this house," he said. "To make normal friends, and have a normal life—" In other words, a life that Tristan had little part in.

"*Tu fais l'imbecile.*" A thing Luke didn't need French to comprehend. "What nonsense."

"Then I'll take Nicola and go."

"Go where? You have no money and you're unlikely to earn any." Tristan scoffed. "Your only talent is that you're the kind who can make others earn your living for you."

"I have the paintings."

Tristan scoffed. “You can’t possibly expect to continue with that.”

There it was at last. He’d as much as admitted the paintings were his: his denial abandoned along with the pretense of “*mon fils*.” “I’m enrolling Nicola in school, Tristan, whether you like it or not. Robin agrees she’s alone too damned much. It’s my decision to make. Public school’s free.”

He flinched at this, as if in physical pain. “You’re doing this without telling her?”

“I’ve told her.”

“And she agreed?” He was incredulous.

“Yes.” Unhappily. But that’s because Nicola was, of course, deeply unhappy; she was drowning in grief. She needed to be with kids her age, and *laugh*. “Yes, Tristan, she did.”

He frowned at this, and Luke could see the wheels turning; he saw doubt creep in. Self-doubt. He spoke in short assured sentences to hide it. “Well. Public school is unthinkable. She’s far too bright for that. There’s a private school; Prescott Primary. You must have driven past it. Fine grounds. *Eh bien*, she will go there.” Agitatedly, he began to pace. “She’ll be advanced far beyond her level.” A disdainful shrug. “But, if you insist. I will pay her tuition. Of course.”

Of course. It smarted. Luke only shrugged. “Fine.”

“It’s natural she should want to meet new people.” Tristan said, as if to himself.

He was hurt, Luke realized. But he didn’t voice his concern, which Luke shared, that Nicola hadn’t been quite satisfied with his explanation of what she’d seen in the garden. Luke didn’t voice it either. To do so, would be to acknowledge it had happened at all.

Tristan paid the tuition, (an ungodly sum), and there had been no other change in financial arrangements; Luke’s bank account had been replenished on the first of October, as it would be the first of November— as it had always been. The only difference was that now it felt uncomfortably like just what it was. Blackmail.

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NICOLA turned and her mother was there. She could see her sometimes for whole seconds before she disappeared. Her hair was sometimes up and sometimes down. Her outfits changed. The word “Mom” still escaped her lips and her thoughts betrayed her: *What would Mom do? What would she say?* They offered false hope: *Maybe Mom will come, will like, want... wear... wish... say... know. Wait'll I tell Mom.*

Everyone else was careful not to mention her. She hated it. She felt as if her mother was tapping her on the shoulder and she was the only one listening.

Today she was conducting an experiment. She walked across the lawn from the house just after nine-thirty. It had been closer to ten the morning she'd found her mother, but the days were shorter now. It was colder, too; the dew had turned to frost that crunched beneath her feet like fine eggshells. It was October fourteenth, a Friday, but there would be no piano lessons to avoid. There had been no lessons of any kind since her mother died. Monday she was to start “normal” school. Everyone kept telling her things would get back to normal, but Nicola wasn't fooled.

She reached the pool house and depressed the handle of one of the French doors, swinging it gently inward. Taking a sharp deep breath, Nicola stepped inside. She'd always had fun here; the sounds of splashing water and laughter still echoed faintly off the flagstones, a hollow sound that seemed to come from another lifetime, one that belonged to someone else.

Pale sunlight penetrated the skylights above and shone wanly on the cerulean surface of the pool. It was too blue, really, Nicola thought, and smelled too strongly of chlorine. Sunlight painted the floor before her with long outlines of the doors and windows. The long wall across the pool was a mirror image of this one, architecturally, but it lay in darkness. Centered on the wall were tall French doors with divided lite windows on each side, and smaller windows above. Further down on each side wide picture windows gave onto the gardens. In spite of this, the immense room appeared dim at this hour, and the reflection of the skylights obscured the water, just as they had that terrible morning. This was why she hadn't seen her mother at first, only the edge of her familiar scarlet robe.

Moving down the wall, Nicola flipped on the overhead lights and the reflection of the skylights practically disappeared as the room was flooded with light. Her mother would have needed light to view the paintings at night; she would have needed them to move around the pool house at all. The runner lights inside the pool wouldn't have been enough to see by in the dark. No one seemed to have thought about it, but it bothered Nicola. The detectives said she'd died between three and five. It would have been dark. *Why weren't the lights on?*

Everything the detectives had said had come to Nicola through other means. She'd been shielded from the investigation, entirely. She was told it was an accident before the investigation ever began, but she knew better.

"It's all over town," Mrs. Pengilly had said to Maggie in the kitchen. "Lord knows, none of us said a thing to anybody. I guess the truth has its own way of coming out. While I was finishing up in here, she came in looking for a bottle of sleeping pills and you could tell she'd been crying—"

"Poor darling."

"It was those filthy paintings." Mrs. Pengilly's hand trembled, clattering her cup against its saucer. "That's when she started acting so strange. That husband of hers, exploiting her for profit."

Maggie agreed with a disparaging wag of her head. "But we can't be *sure*. I, for one, don't believe she'd have killed herself and left little Nicola. Maybe it's true what we said."

Mrs Pengilly scoffed. "That she couldn't sleep and went out to the pool house to 'clear her head?' Went to look at the paintings one last time and just happened to topple into the pool? If you ask me, it was a symbolic act to drown in the middle of all those paintings. And they understood it from the start: Mr. Mourault and Mr. Dresden. You can bet Mr. Farrell knows it, too." She dropped her voice. "A person with vertigo doesn't climb out on the roof to clear his head."

And Nicola knew what Mrs. Pengilly meant, of course. Vertigo was a phobia, like her mother's fear of the water. She wouldn't have gone near enough to the pool to slip and fall in unless she wanted to. There would be no need. The easels were set up several feet from the edge.

Nicola gazed at the southern wall where a door led to the cabana; she'd often changed clothes there or showered after swimming, took a nap or read. She'd never known her mother to spend any time there at all—let alone the night. Her fingernails bit into her palms and tears blurred the room before her. If her mother had committed suicide, it was her fault. She'd locked her out, refused to answer when she knocked. She'd never have come out here, if not for her.

She crossed the room to the glass corridor that connected the pool to the house. What had her father been doing here that morning? And the terrifying thought nagged at her again; she couldn't push it away. Part of her didn't believe her mother could have drowned herself at all. Even if she'd wanted to. Could a person with vertigo go out on the roof, Nicola wondered, even to jump?

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AMANDA was early for her afternoon shift at the library. Traffic hadn't been bad, which in Seattle ought to have been her first clue that the stars were skewed. She parked in the permit lot and hummed blithely as she walked. The library at the University of Washington had been her second home for six years. It was more common for grad students to TA for a professor, but she decided if she didn't get out of the Psych department once in a while, she'd end up in a Psych ward.

And too, she had a bad habit of growing a little too close to her professors.

Last June, after a grueling research project, she'd requested on-leave status for the fall semester. Her advisor reassured her it was normal to suffer burnout from time to time, but was less agreeable when she requested a leave from their relationship, too. Jay Kelly was an esteemed professor and psychologist: marital infidelity and Amanda were his only bad habits. But the first outweighed the second and July saw him with an infatuated undergrad, while she'd met another emotionally inaccessible older man— an artist with just the hint of a southern drawl, named Luke Barrow. Unfortunately, the southern drawl had cleverly concealed a son of a bitch without a soul.

*Don't think about him.* But it wasn't proving an easy thing. There was the chance, just the slightest possibility of a chance, that she was pregnant with the southern drawl's baby.



Added to the notion that she was being stalked by someone obsessed with her sister's murder, the best Amanda could hope for was that there was a thesis in it somewhere. The automatic doors parted, and she entered, casting a paranoid glance around the library that happily failed to detect any psychotic sorts. She inhaled the familiar pungent blend of ink and musty pages, patchouli oil and potato chips. Since she was a child, Amanda had found comfort in books; the library had been her retreat from the ugliness of the world outside. It still was.

She had fifteen minutes to kill and so roamed the main floor idly, taking in the usual academic clutter on the tabletops: notebooks and book bags, geometric proofs, what appeared to be the entire opus of Steinbeck tilting precariously, Jansen's History of Art open to Vermeer. Beyond this, a table had been deserted, leaving a lone magazine behind and a school newspaper. The magazine was the September issue of a regional art review called *Reflex*. Not really her thing. But then her eyes caught on a caption in the corner: *The Latest Wizard from Oz: Devon's Luke Farrell*.

Luke. She'd come to despise the name. But, Devon— from whence her anonymous pen pal hailed? Curiously, Amanda flipped through the pages until she'd located the article.

All at once the pleasant hum around her died; her skin began to tingle, her ears to ring. Images of a woman accompanied the words, and it was a woman she recognized.

She shared Amanda's oval face and the shade of her hair, Amanda's skin tone: fair; the cheekbones: high, but this woman's eyes were wider, a clear aquamarine to Amanda's brown. She wore a wistful, faraway expression, and her slender fingers reached out as if to touch her. Amanda's fingertips hovered above the page in an unconscious mirroring of... Karen's. She could not escape the thought.

*You really have gone round the bend.* This proved it. These were paintings, not photographs. Many women had hair that shade of brown, high cheekbones and wide eyes. Years ago she'd tortured herself with passers-by on the street. That's all this was.

She began to read.

## *Make Me A Voyeur*

What is the artistic relevance of the nude? Is it art for titillation's sake, to feed the voyeuristic instinct, or mere primal lust?

The serious critic scoffs at all such philistine notions. In art school, one studies the human form for only one reason: nowhere is the topography more profoundly varied. The human body is composed of every possible geometric angle and shape and one is taught to study it abstractly, to segment it into triangles and circles, rectangles and squares. This is thought to subtract the sexual element.

And yet the female nude as artistic entity has long reigned supreme. In the past she was idealized, cloaked in mythical or religious symbolism. In the more cynical present, she has been mechanized, digitized, dismembered and rearranged, rendered all but unrecognizable. And all this because the artistic nude is not the nude of pornography, we've learned. The serious viewer is not voyeur and serious art not exhibitionism.

And yet.

The obsessive focus of Luke Farrell's work is his wife's body. It is presented in ways that can only be described as unapologetic objectification. She is bare and covered, beautiful and flawed, by turns shamed and obscene, vital and free. The works are viscerally erotic. Not many, I venture to guess, would dare to know their wives so well.

Yet, in my preview sampling of six (there are rumored to be some forty more), I was struck by the level of engagement Farrell manages to achieve: not only between viewer and subject, but between the seen and unseen. A fetishist focus on parts rather than the whole, and a very deft use of positive and negative space create a running commentary on sexual dynamics in which each piece questions what it appears to know. By the end I felt almost redeemed, in guiltless dialogue again with the feminine form. The subject of these paintings, the beguiling "Gisèle," knows she's being looked at. She looks back. Together we shrugged off our mutual ignominy, easily embracing our roles of voyeur and exhibitionist. Even, in some strange way, exchanging them.

Make no mistake, these are challenging paintings. One camp will label them feminist, another will find them misogynistic; they are too erotic, too harsh... too *real*; their contradiction is their strength. Love them or hate them, buckle up or be unfastened: this is not the neutered, defamed nude we've grown accustomed to. Luke Farrell single-handedly delivers a shock of Eros to a vulgarized art world, and better yet, makes Eros a damned interesting raconteur. And nothing in recent years has struck this reviewer as quite so relevant.

### *The Artist and the Exhibition:*

Luke Farrell hails from Devon and is fortunate in his benefactor: the renowned Robin Dresden, whose cup runneth over. It would admittedly be a feather in any art critic's humble cap to find fault in his latest 'project,' but in Farrell he proves his vision as keen as ever. The exhibition (titled simply, *The Gisèle Paintings*) will be held through October at Dresden Galleries, 1212 Front St., Devon, WA. A reception will be held Saturday, October 1, at 7 p.m. for those who like cocktails with their oeuvres. As for me, I will be happily peering through the window.

Again, Amanda let her eyes travel the page, wryly titling the works as she went: *Before the Bath, In the Bath, After the Bath*, for they weren't titled, but numbered. But they transcended the derivative theme and even poked fun at it. There was a poignant, searching quality to Gisèle's face: *I know you're watching me; what are you looking for?* Despite her beauty, there was a truth to the way she was portrayed. In most paintings, Amanda sensed the distance between artist and subject, an analytical remove, yet here there was no distance. To look at Gisèle was to know her.

Three more pieces were pictured on the facing page. The model's face appeared in none of these; she had been divided into disembodied parts. In the first, shapely calves were curved neatly beneath her thighs. Robbed of color, only shadow and light, the legs ceased to be legs and became more universal: a play on yin and yang in the calf and thigh, while her feet were arched and parted— curved pale shapes enveloping the phallic shadows. If one looked at the whole piece, the opposite occurred; her legs became phallic and the background, the encompassing shadow, was feminine. Amanda refocused her eyes and the effect receded; the legs were simply legs again.

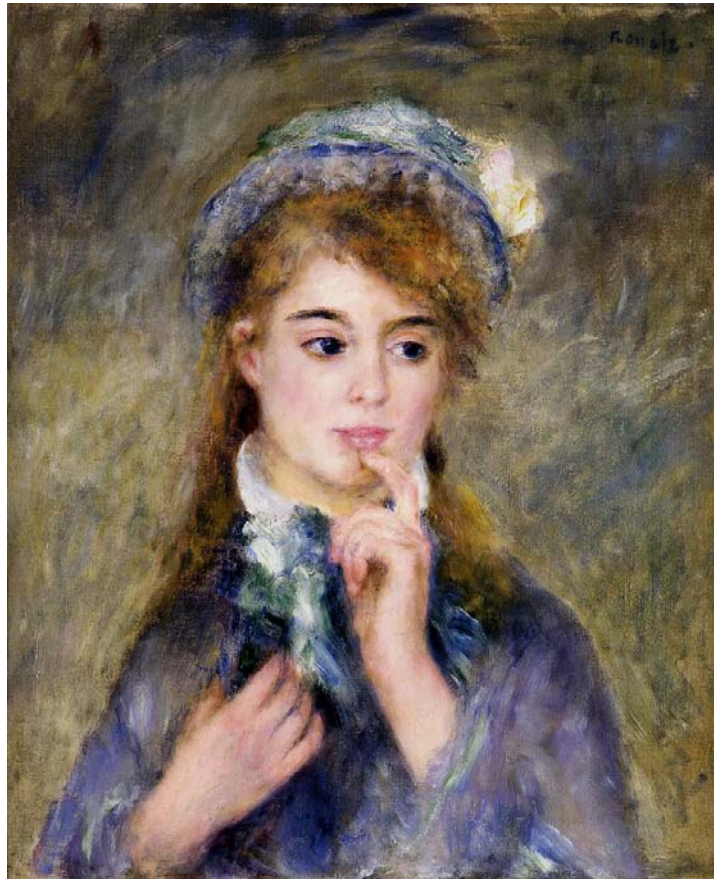
The next image was no more than a midsection, the woman's torso turning so that one could see the curve of hip and buttock, the twist of her waist and the curve of her breast. It was erotic, but almost painfully so. Her skin was faintly blue, as if under the harshest fluorescent light, and the depiction was equally severe: a road map of plotted moles and freckles. Down to the pore, it seemed.

The final painting was on a background of pure red. Gisèle's skin was fragile porcelain, like a doll's. Her head was turned to the left, but her body faced forward, so that one could see the bones of her clavicle, a yoke beneath the skin— and at the top, the line of her jaw. Around her neck she wore a black silk choker and a large pearl hung from it, like the teardrop of a mime.

Amanda's fingers had traveled up to her own throat; she loosened her scarf.

*The exhibition will be held through October at Dresden Galleries.* Today was the twenty-fifth, but there was still time. It wasn't a decision at all, simply the knowledge she would go, as if glimpsed from the future looking back. And the backward glance, somehow, was already bittersweet.

*IX— The Ingénue*



— *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1877*

*I SHALL never forget the day we arrived in New York: it was late May, the trees a vibrant green and flowerboxes brilliant with flowers. And to match them, my Gisèle, as she raced up the stone steps of my brownstone. Her floral dress danced at her knees, and I watched the rounded backs of her calves and the soles of her shoes disappearing up, up. At the landing she paused; between the lion's head pillars she turned to smile at me. And the dream coalesced.*

*My influence over had grown with our distance from San Francisco, and by the time we reached New York, my disapproval and approval had become the poles of her existence. She was quite a different girl from the lonely thing who'd roamed the streets of San Francisco, with no one to look after her. I do not mean that we had ironed out the kinks in our relationship, but simply that there was no reality beyond them. The relationship was our world.*

*And we lived very well, though difficulties arose from the schizophrenic nature of our public and private personae. In public, she had, for the most part to be my daughter; in private she was most certainly not. I understood the father-daughter connotations would be painful for her. They were also a strain on me; I did not enjoy having my perversions aligned with his. We agreed very early on that she would never call me 'Dad' or any reasonable facsimile therein; she called me, always, Tristan. But there were proprieties to be observed, a role to be played, and Gisèle particularly resented playing it at home around the servants.*

*I had no need of a cook as I rarely ate in, but there was a Puerto Rican maid, Nora, who came and went each afternoon and spoke little English in between. And the indispensable Henri: a transplant from Paris and from my childhood. He was an ex-schoolteacher, and as a boy, my favorite tutor. He later became my aide, valet, chauffeur and confidant. Eh bien, perhaps "confidant" is too strong a word; suffice to say, there was much I did not tell him, and in his wisdom, much that he did not ask.*

*To explain Gisèle's presence, I told him a story of a tryst during my time at Princeton. The mother had since died, I claimed: death, the most decisive—and for me, the most familiar—explanation for*

absence. I told him I'd gone to California for the purpose of meeting my daughter; she had no one else to care for her. Naturally, she was unaccustomed to me, my life, New York. We must be protective of her. He agreed to this, and we never spoke of it otherwise. Henri was valued most for his discretion, and he knew this. He had his rooms on the bottom floor, a far better accommodation than he could otherwise afford—and thus was happily on call, but not on watch as it were.

In the beginning, Gisèle was rarely out of my sight. As time went on, I would on occasion leave her with Henri, who became her tutor as he had been mine. Gisèle's lessons took place from twelve to three, as Nora cleaned, and I was always near enough to overhear. I enjoyed this time, watching her playact for me; it was the continued expression of my power over her. Each day that she didn't confess, didn't race down quiet pristine East 75<sup>th</sup> screaming, "I've been kidnapped and kept by a madman!" was a psychological victory, and filled me with the buoyancy of a sculptor who has triumphed over a stubborn lump of clay.

To the neighbors, a simple: "Have you met my daughter, Gisèle?" sufficed. I was close to none of them, and even the obstinately sociable Mr. Mulligan from next door, who seemed perpetually to be walking his pugs (a thing that bore a queer sadistic edge, as the poor things were strangling on the leash all the while he made his pleasantries), asked no awkward questions.

That said, there were adjustments to be made. I had been a bachelor for years, and had little experience living with anyone. Sabina was a capricious creature, to be sure, but in our three and a half-year marriage we lived largely separate lives in separate regions of the house. I'm not at all certain of her more private idiosyncrasies; we shared the public ones when we met for dinner or the theatre or posed for parties, even at the end when we happened to pass on the stair.

And so it was with some wonder that I discovered Gisèle.

She quickly showed herself to be a person of singularly meticulous personal habits, given to lengthy showers and an elaborate toilette. I had corrupted her with the early gifts from the Lancôme counter. She soon found the point of all those creams and powders, toners and cleansers, moisturizers and brushes and

*they ever afterward became an indispensable part of her 'look.' Though I was often kept waiting, I found it all very endearing, as I presumed it to be done for me.*

*Once a routine was established she held on to it like a talisman, and gazing back now I see that she was suspended in a new world and rootless. All she had were her routines. For the most part I accepted them as a fascinating glimpse into her inner world, but it must be said that in many respects my Gisèle possessed a somewhat dubious taste in everything. Her eating habits appalled me: at breakfast, she spurned the omelettes or crepes I enjoyed for questionable items like pop tarts. Indeed, the prepackaged food product was her companion of choice. She didn't eat lunch, but instead grazed through an exhaustive list of snack food, which I tried in vain to infuse with cheeses, breads, and fruit. And in her appearance and dress, she was in a state of constant metamorphosis. Most of her incarnations pleased me. The daily shade of lipstick and coiffure. She'd pull her hair back in a French braid, or up in a twist, and occasionally even work out the curls by some feminine alchemy. I preferred it tousled and free, yet I found her attempts to harness it quite a spectator sport. Before settling at last upon Yves St. Laurent's "Paris," (in homage to me), she collected perfume samples to change her scent. Often this backfired: a fifteen-year-old girl in Gucci? I was also disturbed by her experiments with various shades of eye shadow, and she went through a troubling phase of wearing an aqua mascara to match her eyes. Mon Dieu.*

*Ah, but I had a wonderful time dressing her. Such exquisite pleasure it was to see her turn for me, the flare of her skirt or the line of her pants, the faint line of panties beneath and an anxious expression upon her face; it was for me to decide yes or no, like the Roman emperor in the Coliseum. I gave her no money of her own apart from pocket change, but she had no need of it; I denied her very little.*

*Sightseeing easily filled our first weeks. Each afternoon after her lessons, we roamed the city. We explored the parks and endless galleries, block after block of shops. I saw everything again for the first time. Somehow in New York the term tourist trap is terribly apt. There are things you simply happen upon, like Times Square and the Flatiron, the Empire State Building and St. Patrick's: one of the loveliest cathedrals*

*in the world pocketed so neatly among the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue skyscrapers and boutiques. No one seems to even note the incongruity. It is not the same in Paris, where things seem to have always been.*

*Gisèle quickly took to the city: she loved the energy of it, the immensity. It was as different from San Francisco as two cities can be, and I made sure the contrast was a pleasant one. Once led down the yellow brick road, I was betting Dorothy would never really choose to leave Oz. And so each evening we traveled vicariously through cuisine: Japanese, Italian, French, Greek, Indian, Moroccan, Thai. I took Gisèle to Tavern on the Green. She adored the art deco grandeur, which she found terribly gaudy and “very cool,” and delighted in the topiary: “Lions and tigers and bears, oh, my!” Afterward, we took a carriage ride through the park and she fed the horse peanut M&M’s stashed in her evening bag.*

*Gisèle was so illuminated by the simplest of things that it was a joy to spoil her, and I was utterly charmed by her naïveté. She puzzled over the attendant one must tip in the ladies room: (“Why do people in New York need a person to turn on the water and squirt soap in their hands? Is there some kind of shortage?”) We rode the subway, as a sort of “wild safari,” and she believed the stories taxi-drivers told. The whole city, it seemed, was alive with former KGB. She was taken in by the street hawkers, and also by the glitz of Times Square, so that we just had to stand in line at the ticket box at fifteen below zero when I could easily have obtained tickets to Peter Pan and A Chorus Line through more seasonable channels. Afterward—immune to frostbite—she asked to have her picture taken with the Planter’s Peanut Man. I purchased a Polaroid for the occasion, and finally realized their value, a thing completely unexploited by Madison Avenue. “Polaroid: the choice of the paranoid.”*

*One lovely day, never to come again, we went to the Met in the snow, the tires of the car fishtailing all the way. After taking in the Impressionists, we watched through the windows as giant flakes blanketed Central Park, and outside, like a peculiar performance art, urbanites donned cross-country skis and had snowball fights. We joined them, writing our names in the windshields of snow-buried cars.*



*As time wore on, I grew increasingly lax. New York is a vast city; it lulls one into a false sense of security with its vastness. I began to feel we were invisible in the crowd, and there were occasions when I could not help but desert the fatherly role. One night I took Gisèle to Twenty-one, and we were very careful: I was merely an indulgent father taking my daughter to dinner and the theatre. She was delighted by a private tour of the hidden room behind the kitchen, left over from the days of prohibition when the club had operated as a speakeasy. There was a table that had once been reserved for the mayor, and racks of dusty wine bottles reserved for the likes of Cary Grant and Elizabeth Taylor.*

*In the restaurant above, we met rather unavoidably the Pools from Iowa: “Ed and Edith from Edna.” We’d checked our coats at the same time. They had come because the club is mentioned in Hitchcock’s “Rear Window,” and I should thus have been warned, for they were soon to play voyeur.*

*The next day we were on the viewing deck at the top of the Empire State building, blending chameleon-like into a group of disparate tourists. Gisèle was teasing me at the edge and I imprisoned her between my arms, placing my hands on the cold rails. She looked so lovely I couldn’t resist kissing her. Turning, we were confronted by the Pools, whom we had rendered entirely incapable of speech. They were too near to avoid; we pushed past each other with incoherent mumbles and moved rapidly in opposite directions. Horrified of being trapped in an elevator with them, Gisèle and I took refuge in the restrooms.*

*The door opened almost immediately after me, and there was Ed. I was thus rather forced to make use of the facilities. He took a urinal two down; naturally, neither of us looked at the other.*

*“Don’t mean to pry, but the wife and I couldn’t help noticin’—”*

*“She’s not really my daughter,” I said hastily.*

*“Like ‘em young, do you?”*

*“She’s eighteen.”*

*“Sure she is.”*

*“She’s small; people think she’s younger.”*

*“Masqueradin’ as your daughter...”*

*“It’s a game she likes to play. She has a kink that way.”*

*“I’ll say. Mighty strange.”*

*“It’s not so uncommon.”*

*He cleared his throat and zipped his pants. “Well, my advice is play it in private; people don’t like seeing that sort of thing right under their noses. Got my wife all upset.”*

*“I’m sorry about that.”*

*He just grunted something vulgar about the French and left without washing his hands.*

*And so the cloak went on for good. This involved, for me, duplicity to old friends and associates as well as new acquaintances. Yet, the role made more poignant our hours offstage. I treasured our ‘secret life.’ There was the play, and there was the sweet refuge of the wings.*

*And yet our “private life” may also surprise you.*

*Gisèle was so naïve about sexuality, she believed I could resist an erection through sheer will. I let her believe this. For the first year, would you believe we did nothing but kiss? I explored; I touched her, of course. But though she could be a terrible flirt, she was just a kitten in bed. She touched me superficially, everywhere but. This was just as well. It allowed her to trust me in a way she’d trusted no one else.*

*At the heart of it lay a genuine terror of the male anatomy, and at last she confessed to me her father’s drunken forays into her bedroom. In the sordid spectrum of incest it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought, but quite bad enough; a matter of clumsy fumbling about the breasts and buttocks, under bras and down panties, wet beery kisses, and “I love you, Angel. You know that, don’t you? You know I love you.”*

*She claimed her father stopped at masturbating in front of her, yet I privately suspected this was not the case. I am no psychologist, but she was quite resistant even to being pleased, and I could only conclude that something unpleasurable had been attached to the idea. Once, when she’d had too much champagne,*

*and I was trying to talk her through her bed-spinning stage, she began to cry in pitiful sobs, murmuring something about being taken 'out on the boat,' but what boat and what her father did there, I don't know. I could get nothing more intelligible out of her, and later she pretended not to remember. But it perhaps explained her morbid dread of the water, which was equal only to her morbid dread of the penis.*

*It made me very protective of her, and for a long time we merely slept together; side-by-side, surprised by the ease of our intimacy. But do not think me so chaste I didn't wish for more. All it took was a glimpse of her, even the scent of her (I could write a volume upon this alone: the honey sweet scent of her hair, the salt of her skin, the sharp scent of the soap she used at night to wash her face, her light floral perfume, the tart newness of panties left on the bathroom floor.) Any part of the whole was enough for me to become so aroused that it seemed my entire body throbbed. And to touch her was a sort of converse thumbscrew; so acute was the torture of being on the outside. I vacillated between desperate love and bitter resentment; she was a Chinese box I could not open.*

*And of course she thought I could and would not, and that was a precious fine distinction. For here at last is the rub. A monster I may be, but a monster without claws. In our strange way we were quite perfect for each other, you see. The erection she found so abhorrent I could not maintain.*

*It was not always so. I began quite early, losing my virginity at the age of thirteen, and a happily promiscuous young man afterward—until the ripe old age of nineteen and a half: coitus interruptus, quite literally. No matter how strongly I began, I would never reach a satisfying end again. Alas, now you find sympathy for poor Sabina! She knew the grim realities, as it happens; we each got what we wanted: she, a legitimate last name for her child and me a (however, illegitimate) marriage entitling me to my inheritance. Her pregnancy allowed me the illusion of virility; I allowed her the illusion of respectability. It was a mutually beneficial partnership. We played a rousing game of gin rummy on our wedding night.*

*There is no medical reason for my impotence, and no known cure. (I'd prescribed Sabina, but to no avail.) I have tried all the herbal remedies, western medication, eastern meditation, acupressure and*

*acupuncture (not quite the painful image that rushes to mind; the needles are not placed there.) And still nothing. An after effect of dabbling in my father's medications as a child, perhaps, or a recessive family gene. I sometimes wonder if it wasn't this that drove my father mad.*

*Ah, yes. And now you see how very apt the novel Gisèle was reading at the time of our first meeting: The Sun Also Rises, and the poetic choice of my early pseudonym. It was all very poignantly apt. And perhaps you suspected all along, for it explains my restraint. A pity it is not such a noble thing.*

*And yet our relationship was more than mere masochism, for I am better off than poor Jake. When I found Gisèle I felt a stirring I hadn't felt in fifteen years. Not enough for penetration, intercourse, coitus: all the lovely mechanistic terms for the act of love, but enough for release. She released me. I was a half-hearted priest, my chastity forced on me, but at last I was to be delivered. She was fifteen, do you see? The symmetry of it was lovely. She had come to complete me.*

*And so at last, perhaps, you see.*

*Our first year together was a lovely, euphoric time for me, so that perhaps I underestimated the strain of it upon her. She fell occasionally into depressions: sullen, accusatory silences I liked to think had something to do with menstruation, with feminine vagaries I could hardly be expected to know how to ease. She would grow melancholy and cry over trifles. Once, on an evening in January, in the midst of "Three's Company," Gisèle rose and ran tearfully from the room. I found her lying on her stomach on the bed.*

*I sat beside her, stroking her hair, and after a moment she rolled on her side and fixed me with a glassy stare. "Today's Mandy's birthday, Tristan. My little sister is ten."*

*So that was it. I murmured soothing words. "Come, ma petite, do not cry. Tell me about her."*

*And so, curled up against me, she told me her little sister's favorite ice cream (strawberry), favorite color (red), favorite television show: The Dukes of Hazzard, (I was dubious at this, but she assured me it was so.) Favorite author: Beverly Cleary. They had both had a crush on Shaun Cassidy, and Gisèle bought*

*Mandy her first 45: "Da Doo Run Run." She'd eaten half Gisèle's chocolate Santa the previous Christmas, and tried to cover it up by smoothing the foil wrapping over the empty part of his belly. But she wasn't a tattletale or a cry-baby, and the day Amanda was born had been the best day of her life. Tears filled her eyes. "And I just left her there, Tristan."*

*Well, what was one to do? I thought of buying a cake with Mandy's name scrolled in frosting and ten candles placed on, so Gisèle might close her eyes and send her sister a birthday wish. Of course, this could snowball into a confectionary remembrance of all her relatives. We would be eating a lot of cake. As my mind was traveling down these frivolous avenues, I could see that her eyes had grown clear, and her gaze was one I didn't recognize. Heartbreakingly adult.*

*She said, "You don't understand, do you? I left her there. With my father." And then she said, "You're going to find out when the phone bill comes anyway, so I might as well tell you." She hardly needed to say the rest; my heart had stopped. "While you were in the shower, I tried to call her." Gisèle dropped her eyes to the bedspread. "Mandy likes to answer the phone and I just wanted to hear her voice. She has such a cheerful 'hello.' I wanted to make sure it hadn't changed."*

*"And had it?" I didn't recognize my voice. It was without inflection.*

*"I didn't get through. The number's been the same forever." A worried frown formed between her brows. "I tried dialing information for Patrick Miller, and nothing. We've never been unlisted; it costs an extra dollar a month." Tears shone again in her eyes. "I don't know what's happened."*

*But I did.*

*Though Gisèle didn't know it, I read the San Francisco Chronicle as habitually as Le Monde. Earlier in the month, I'd scanned a report of a fatal car accident. Predictably, the driver was drunk and his driving was more than reckless, it was suicidal. And then I caught the driver's name: Patrick Miller.*

*There had been an explosion; the car was charred, and in that first report, it was thought that his wife and daughter were also in the car. I could not have contrived a more fitting end for her father, but I*

*found myself haunted by Gisèle's mother and the little ballerina. Later reports would clarify things: her mother was the only passenger; her sister had been located later and placed in the custody of an aunt. In the last three weeks I'd wrestled with the question of whether or not to tell Gisèle.*

*But now I saw a chance to snip the last tie to her past, and I took it.*

*At first, she would not believe me. At her urging, I sent for a copy of the paper, making certain it was the date of the initial false report. And she had no choice but to believe. Her response frightened me, for there was no response at all. For days she refused to speak of it. And then with a frightening abandon, in the middle of the night, her sobs cut my heart from my chest with razor blades. The next day, I banned Henri and Nora from the apartment. I bathed her, fed her, held her, and my conscience pricked me keenly all the while. But common sense prevailed. She could hardly fail to contact her little sister under such a circumstance. What other means did I have to bind her to me?*

*That night, red-eyed and hoarse from crying, she told me "the whole truth." I listened, but could feel no anger. Shock has no feeling at all. I simply listened to her broken voice and understood why she had been worried about the phone bill. She'd spoken to her mother on the day of the accident.*

*A phone call seemed safe, she said. No postmark. She hadn't told her mother about me or where she was, just that she was all right now and not to worry. She'd told her to worry about Mandy. "It all just came out, Tristan. What he did to me. And then I was so horrified I hung up. I never even told her I loved her..."*

*We never spoke of it again, yet she'd lost the last of her childish wonder. Even my most extravagant diversions were met with a delight that never quite reached her eyes. In her mind, Gisèle hadn't merely abandoned her family, but destroyed it. In her attempt to save her sister, she'd killed her.*

*And I committed perhaps my gravest crime. I let her think it.*

*X— The Thinker*



— *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1877*

AMANDA gazed from the tiny window of the puddle-jumper to the chiseled white tips of the Cascade Mountains below: the glaciated peaks spilling over into waves of pine-laden hills and lush meadows. Finally upper Lake Devon came into view, a spectacular sight from the air, with jagged granite cliffs plummeting to the inky blue water. On the northwestern edge, the raging Bastille River sliced through the mountains, emptying into the lake so forcefully that it created a whirlpool at its mouth. Amanda often heard reports of drownings on Seattle news stations, accompanied by footage of searchers scaling the cliff sides and too-familiar reports of bodies never found.

The “upper” lake was one of a pair in the alpine resort area. They were conjointly labeled, Devon Lakes, on the map though in practice the upper lake was called “Lake Devon” and its lesser twin was simply the “lower lake.” It was benign by comparison: a great pale sapphire on the valley floor. A popular, affordable retreat for college kids and families, the town of Lakewood on its western shore possessed the only public airport in the area. Amanda would have to rent a car and drive up to Devon; it was reachable only by a single ribbon of road that sometimes closed in winter, due to snow. Great, if one could afford to be cozily snowbound. Otherwise, it meant chartering a seaplane or helicopter. Many of the residents had private hangars, which was indicative of the average income of residents in Devon. Amanda could only hope it didn’t snow.

Part of her knew it was all a wild goose chase, and an extravagant one at that; the odds of “Gisèle” having any connection to her sister were anorexically slim. The other part of her was glad of the distraction. It kept her mind off Luke Barrow, and her latest and greatest act of self-delusion.

He hadn’t even been her usual type. Ironically, it was this that had attracted her. They’d met through a colleague of Jay’s, named Marc Kreicek, who’d approached the esteemed professor early that summer about doing a book. Marc’s father had been a hypnotherapist of some renown in Prague during the communist era. Many of his writings had been suppressed, and they were working to have them released by the government and published in the west.



Marc made Amanda uncomfortable from the moment she met him. He'd crossed the room with a quick agile step, and she had the irrational feeling that he might spring. He was attractive in a slinky feline way: gaunt of frame, with a sly secretive expression, rumpled dark hair, olive skin, and a starved quality to his foam-green eyes. She could tell within a minute of meeting that he intended to know her in the biblical sense, and it had for lack of a more technical term, creeped her out. And so she'd treated him with kid gloves, and tried to avoid him altogether. She knew that he'd practiced psychology for a short time, though he now appeared to be without profession; he 'painted,' Jay said. Not houses. Jay was enamored with him, and with the project for which he anticipated accolades. One day in June, she and her esteemed professor found themselves muddling through an awkward lunch, pretending to be no more than friends and colleagues. Marc Kreicek arrived with his friend, Luke; he and Jay talked shop; Amanda talked gratefully to Luke.

He had dirty blond hair and a sheepish sort of charm; a naughty little-boy quality that she'd found irresistible, probably because it was entirely new. Though he was attending an art seminar at the college, he wasn't an academic. He was honest and direct and refreshing. It had been a simple relationship, but beautiful in its simplicity: walks in the park and along the wharf, flowers, cards, dinners and movies. There had been a strange kind of innocence to it.

But in August his art seminar at the university ended, and so abruptly had the romance—until early this month when he'd returned en masse, showing up at her door with long-stem roses and heartfelt apologies and looking like death: a thing Amanda never seemed able to resist. She'd been safe till then. But he hadn't shaved in days; he was hardly dressed for a date, and it seemed to startle him that he was even there. There was a look in his eyes: raw, but sweet and almost frightened underneath. As though he'd never been loved and never expected to be.

The innocence flew out the window. There was a reckless abandon to the sex, like two alcoholics on a bender. Afterward, he hadn't even called. She should scarcely have been surprised, and yet she'd been stunned. It was a strange sensation, but one for which she had a particular faculty: to be utterly surprised by the expected.

Only then did it dawn on her that she'd missed her pill a couple of days in that month's cycle. Though she'd doubled up afterward, the slight risk seemed to grow in the ensuing silence. After ten days she broke her cardinal rule and called him. She had only a cell phone number. Luke had been brusque to the point of rudeness, and she would never forget his last words: "Look, I'm sorry, Mandy, but obviously I changed my mind." *Obviously*. He'd sounded so squirmy and scared: scared of being caught. And suddenly it was obvious to her that he was married. Of course he was. Horrified and embarrassed, she'd simply hung up.

The plane curved in a great swoop over the shimmering water, and Amanda yawned to pop her ears. She resolutely forced Luke and visions of fatherless infants from her mind. Wild goose chase or not, as the plane touched down it had the air of an adventure. She collected her suitcase, and trailed to the *Avis* counter to rent the requisite SUV. Squinting down at her map in the slanted autumn sunshine, she navigated past the airport and was soon on the road to Devon.

The drive was literally breathtaking: forty minutes of evergreens and granite and a climbing road that inspired vertigo. A few feet to her right an insubstantial guardrail was meant to prevent her from plunging down to the Bastille, rushing indifferently below. At last the vista widened, and the expansive rolling hills of a private golf club were the first signs of civilization. Deer strolled across the green as if they were members in good standing. She reached a gate shortly thereafter, and was charged six dollars for the privilege of entering Devon and being overcharged for everything inside.

The Cascades loomed dizzyingly overhead, and she crossed a scenic bridge to pass beside the gauzy veil of Clannad Falls tumbling over hundreds of feet to meet the vast lake, sparkling darkly in the dappled afternoon sunshine. As she drove along the water sprawling mansions and charming cottages began to appear, peeking shyly from behind evergreens along the surrounding hills. The town of Devon lay at the west end, and it was something from a storybook. Patterned after an English village, all the shops were thatch-roofed with shuttered windows and Dutch doors, or tall Tudor style. The inns and B&B's were English country homes or tightly corseted Victorians,

scalloped and turreted and infallibly charming. In the historic section, the streets were cobblestone, the streetlights gas lit. There were gourmet markets and bakeries, cheese shops and chocolatiers, a myriad of canopied boutiques and fine restaurants, spas and salons, and over fifty art galleries.

If Devon had an industry beyond tourism, it was art. Local artists were often internationally known, and preeminent among them was the expressionist painter and sculptor, Robin Dresden—the force behind the exhibition of the Gisèle Paintings. Amanda had been unable to find out anything substantive about the artist, Luke Farrell, or his muse, Gisèle, yet there was plenty to be learned about Mr. Dresden. The general consensus was that he was a “genius,” and he’d earned a doctorate from Oxford at an obscenely young age— not in art, it seemed, but in philosophy. Yet his personal philosophy appeared hard to pin down; he was labeled both philanthropist and elitist, Svengali and guru, fearless artistic innovator and opportunistic charlatan. None of it seemed to hurt business. One of his works, entitled *Desecration*, had recently sold for three million dollars at auction.

It all painted a colorful picture, but one that seemed less and less likely to include Karen. She had escaped death to run with the artistic elite? It was a stretch, even to one who wanted to believe.

Amanda found a parking spot and began to walk. Around her, an upscale milieu of tourists ducked in and out of shops, and something divine floated from a terraced restaurant above her, mingling with crisp air piquant with pine, anise, and the smoky scent of dry leaves. She made her way to Front Street, which meandered along the shore line. Shimmering water stretched as far as the eye could see, an astonishing shade of cobalt blue, and a lone sailboat bobbed like a dorsal fin along the surface. Lake Devon lapped hungrily at a smooth swath of sand, and children played just out of reach, among the driftwood, one balancing on a low stone wall like a miniature tightrope walker.

The outpost of Dresden Galleries at number 1212 was a great thatch-roofed building with charming green shutters and a rustic Dutch door. Broad bay windows held the muted still lifes of a Russian artist and a trio of lush Mediterranean scenes by a French one, the paint applied so thickly with a palette knife that it looked more like bas-relief. But there was no sign of Gisèle.

The upper portion of the Dutch door was open, and Amanda peered inside. The gallery director was on the phone, but acknowledged her from his wide marble desk with an encouraging smile. Chiding herself for needing the encouragement, Amanda depressed the door handle firmly. She'd glean what facts she could about the artist and his model, and that would most likely be that.

The gallery was an architectural feat of soaring cove ceilings, glazed walls and distressed wood floors. She roamed down the gently sloping walkways. Angled walls created the illusion of separate rooms, and each held an exquisite array of art and sculpture. None of which interested Amanda in the least.

She returned to the front of the gallery. "Rolf van Duren," the director's nameplate read, like something out of *The Sound of Music*. And indeed he looked like Rolf all grown up, with his perfectly coifed blond hair, barely-there moustache and tailored silk suit. It all went into the price of the paintings, she imagined. He replaced the receiver, and gazed up with a practiced smile.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. How may I help you?"

"I'm interested in an artist named Luke Farrell. I understood there was to be an exhibition--"

"Ah, yes." A frown. "The Gisèle Paintings. It was canceled, I'm afraid, and has yet to be rescheduled. Under the circumstances I'm not entirely sure it will be."

Amanda's ears had begun to whirl. "What circumstances?" But it was as if she already knew.

"I'm sorry to say Farrell's wife and model, Gisèle, passed away a month ago."

"My God. How...?"

"A fluke accident. She drowned in her own pool."

*Well that, at least, rules out Karen.* Drowning entailed first getting into the water.

Chattily, Rolf continued, "Mr. Dresden is very close to the family, and it hit us all very hard. Such a lovely woman. She didn't swim at all, poor dear. It seems she suffered from a phobia." His next words were lost to her. *A fear of water is common enough. Surely.* "...but I'd be happy to contact you as soon as I learn the future of the exhibition."

Amanda rattled off her name and address, but she hadn't come all this way to get on a mailing list. "In lieu of the artist, might I arrange to speak with Mr. Dresden?" She swallowed; her mouth always went dry when she lied. "You see, I write for 'Reflex.' I'm doing a story on Gisèle."

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Questions

- 1) *Why was Mom crying in the garden?*
- 2) *Was it really a fatherly kiss?*
- 3) *If so, why was Dad mad? What did they argue about?*
- 4) *Did he have an affair, or did she?*
- 5) *Why was the mirror closed in her room?*
- 6) *Who spilled the perfume? Was it during the argument?*
- 7) *Why did she go out to the pool house? To get away from Dad?*
- 8) *Did he follow her or just go out for his paintings? Why didn't he tell me she was there?*
- 9) *Could she have been meeting someone else?*
- 10) *How did Grand-père know she was there?*
- 11) *What about the lights??*

"NICOLA...?"

She jumped; ink derailed the line. "Grand-père, you scared me." He'd been sitting there all the time she wrote in her notebook, blending into the granite and the tree trunks and the shade, like the twig that had once curled round her finger. She'd never been able to look at twigs quite the same. She squinted at him. "Why didn't you say hello?"

His voice was low, blending into the rush of the creek beside them. "I didn't wish to disturb you, *mon chaton*. What is it you're so immersed in writing?"

"Oh, this?" She closed the cover of her notebook a little too quickly, and tried to be casual as she slid her pen into the spiral. "Just, you know, homework."

"So soon? You've only just started school."

"It's been over a week."

Tristan frowned fleetingly. "And how do you find it?"

“It’s fine, I guess.” Nicola traced squiggles in the dirt with the toe of her sneaker. “I don’t really know anybody yet.” So far she’d written off both genders. Some of the boys had teased her about her height— it seemed to Nicola they were simply short— and the girls were worse. A popular one, named Kelly, started calling her “Ricola” after the Swiss girl in the cough drop commercials. She would have laughed it off a month ago, but now small talk eluded her; quick comebacks crawled into her consciousness too late. It was as if she’d forgotten how to *be* with people, and they sensed it.

“But you’ll make friends easily, *chérie*.” Tristan cleared his throat. “I know you will. It’s why your father felt it so important that you go. I am more selfish. I miss our days together.”

“So do I, Grand-père.” But Nicola focused her attention on the surface of the mossy rock, sweeping away a few fallen leaves and tracing a picture with her finger. She’d never had this trouble with her grandfather; they’d always been able to talk about anything. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, you can. Nicola.” But from his slight frown, she knew he’d guessed the subject.

“It’s just that when I found Mom, the lights in the pool house weren’t on. The only light was from the skylights. I remember the reflections on the water.”

Tristan tipped his head to catch her eyes. “*Mais oui*, that is true.”

“Everyone said she went out to look at the paintings, but how could she have seen them in the dark? And if she could see, how did she fall in? She never went near the edge—”

“You have given this a good deal of thought.” And then, as if to himself, “But of course you have. No one knows how it happened, *mon enfant*. She had a change of clothes in the cabana and her cosmetic case. It’s clear she’d gone there for the night. She’d changed into her dressing gown and taken her sleeping pills.” Tristan sighed and he looked very weary, suddenly. Nicola felt a pang of regret for making him talk about it. “And still she couldn’t sleep. She wouldn’t have needed to turn on the overhead lights in the pool house, you see. We had special lights set up for the party, don’t you remember? Uplights around the easels? *Eh bien*, it’s not the best light for paintings, too many shadows.” A frown. “But the lights were timed— to come on at midnight and shut off at three.”

Nicola bit her lip. “But then they might even have gone out while she was—” It was too awful to think about. Her mother, disoriented in the darkness, stumbling... falling. All alone.

Tristan rose and came to sit beside her; Nicola scooted over, onto her notebook, so that the wire spiral bit into her hip. He gazed down at her, and said gently, “You mustn’t think of it.”

“I can’t help it.” Nicola swallowed. “Why was she so afraid of the water?”

“The worst fears have no rational cause, Nicola. It was simply always with her. I did try to teach her to swim once.” His eyes were fixed on a point beyond her, seeing something that wasn’t there. He gave a short sad laugh. “She was like a cat in the bathwater. Within two minutes she was out again. Phobias are strange, crippling thing. Like obsessions, I suppose. And addictions. There are things that choose *you*; they are not chosen, and not so easily abandoned. I know this from experience.” Nicola waited, watching. Her grandfather had always been able to order everything, to explain it all. He swung his leg as he spoke, striking the heel of his shoe against the granite shelf on which they sat. His pale eyes were no more than blue dashes as he squinted into the stark sunlight. “I had a fear of heights as a child, a thing I’ve battled all my life. But over time elevators ceased to trouble me, and I was at ease upon balconies. I thought I had conquered it. And then, some years ago, I was walking with Robin along some old railroad tracks and we came to a trestle. *Eh bien*, it was sturdy enough; we were discussing some project or another, and I was halfway across when I gazed down through the slats. The canyon rushed up to meet me, *mon chaton*. I broke into a sweat in the cold. My ears began to ring. I was sick with fear. Paralyzed. The narrow gaps were too wide to cross. I was so certain I’d fall that there is little doubt I should have.”

Nicola barely breathed. “How did you make it?”

“Robin was able to talk me through it, though it was not a dignified crossing, I’m afraid. Fear, simple irrational fear, is the most terrifying enemy one can face.”

“Then you don’t think she could have done it on purpose?”

Tristan gazed at her blankly. “Done what on purpose?”

Nicola met his eyes. “Drown.”

“*C’est de la merde!*” he exclaimed, angrily. “Who is telling you these things?”

Nicola gazed away. She didn’t want to get anyone in trouble. “Just someone in town.”

“God save us from the scourge of a small town. It’s a malicious lie.” Tristan’s tone was withering, but his gaze softened as he reached out to smooth her hair. “No wonder you’ve been acting so strangely. To have kept these doubts to yourself. Why didn’t you come to me sooner?”

“I don’t know.” She did know, of course, and hadn’t mentioned her greatest doubt of all. She hadn’t mentioned what she’d seen in the garden. It grew more unreal with each passing moment. How could she have thought such awful things about him? About her mother?

“Listen to me, Nicola. The investigators declared your mother’s death an accident. That’s what it was. But death is always inexplicable: accidental death, natural deaths. One is never satisfied. But you must remember that we *knew* her, you and I. We are the reasons she wouldn’t have killed herself. She wouldn’t have left us.” Nicola nodded, blinking back tears. “But we still have each other, *mon chaton*, we mustn’t ever lose that.”

With a crunch of dead leaves Nicola turned to hug her grandfather. Her notebook slid down the rock, and though she jumped down to retrieve it, it didn’t seem so necessary anymore.

The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and Nicola shivered. Tristan slipped his sweater over her shoulders as they walked home. “There’s an eclipse tonight, I understand,” he remarked. “Do we have a date at midnight on the roof top? I will bring the hot chocolate.”

She laughed, nodding, but then remembered she had school tomorrow. “I don’t really like the kids at my new school, Grand-père,” she confessed. “I don’t fit in at all.”

“Ah, but you needn’t fit in, *ma chère*.” Tristan looked down at her, affectionately. “That is an American conspiracy. I’ve never fit in anywhere. Simply be yourself, and they will fit in with you.”

If only it were that easy... Nicola hugged her notebook to her chest, and looked at him wistfully. She was beginning to see things weren’t quite as simple as Grand-père made them seem.

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ROBIN Dresden agreed to see Amanda “briefly,” if she could meet him in an hour at the college. She assured Rolf she could. The trouble was what to say once she got there.

Devon College was known to Amanda by reputation: one of those rarified progressive schools in which grades were thought to damage the delicate psyches of the students. It struck her as a tad ironic since by college age students had already been damaged by grading hierarchies, and schools like this skimmed from the top. It was along the lines of Bennington and Hampshire and Reed, with a tiny student body and a vast distinguished faculty. Aptly, it was renowned for its art programs, offering an unusual Interdisciplinary Arts degree that encouraged students to cross-pollinate between disciplines: sculpture and painting, music, theater, and writing. She’d discovered this in her recent research. One of the less favorable articles on Dresden concerned his involvement with an elite group of students he mentored within the degree, in a major called Art Philosophy. The program was limited to just six and his influence over them had been characterized as “cultish.”

If the students in question had indeed been brainwashed, Amanda thought, they couldn’t have asked for a nicer setting for it. Pale sandstone buildings were spread luxuriously over a thousand gorgeous acres. The campus was an arboretum and many of the trees were in the death throws of autumn; brilliant shades of orange and magenta carpeted the walkways and punctuated the endless expanse of green. Leaves blew on the breeze and crackled underfoot, scratching out a lonely melody beneath her feet. Reassuring strains of a Pearl Jam song emanated from a dorm window somewhere above. Two boys tossed a Frisbee on her right; to her left, a flock of girls lay on blankets in the grass: alternately giggling, studying the boys, and gazing up in boredom up at a sky that was impossibly blue, pale rays of sunlight lending a silver lining to the puffy cotton-ball clouds.

Still, Amanda shivered with apprehension as she reached the great ivy-covered tower at the center of campus. Impressively Gothic, it had once been part of a monastery, Rolf had told her, a relic around which the school was built. “One can’t miss it.” And one certainly couldn’t.

The ivy had lost most of its leaves and clung darkly to the stone exterior in a death grip. As she gazed up its length sunlight glared off the leaded glass, blinding her and leaving the landscape alive with its skeleton. The base of the tower was surrounded by gardens and a high wrought iron gate entwined with rose vines. Amanda was filled with a childish desire to trespass and explore.

For a moment it seemed it would have to be the former. She found the gate locked. She called through the bars, and then with a start noticed Robin leaning against the wall of the tower, completely in shadow and staring directly at her. He closed his eyes momentarily and reopened them, too long for a blink— more as if he were garnering patience, or resurfacing from a deep meditation— and either way, Amanda thought, rather rude. But with his renewed concentration, she forgave him.

“You really mustn’t yell,” he said, with a pained expression as he started towards her. “There’s a buzzer, as you’ll see, to your right.” His accent was a surprise: upper class British and tremendously resonant, like an actor. “It rings inside and generally someone civilized will emerge to let you in.” He pushed a lock of hair from his forehead and gave her a wry smile. “Like magic.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see.”

Robin opened the gate and peered down at her. It was hard not to stare at him, though his attraction wasn’t exactly the healthy kind: his dark clothes accentuated the nearly black hair and the dark smudges beneath his eyes, and the eyes themselves were such a strange color: a clear deep gray as dark as charcoal, with pale flecks in them like ice. Or ashes. Yes. Pale iridescent ashes, and black soot. And then there was his mouth. It turned down slightly at the corners, giving him a demanding, restless expression. But these quirks were his appeal, for otherwise he was a study in symmetry: dark hair, dark lashes, dark brows and sculpted cheekbones, and the kind of lips one imagined... they twitched now, amused, as if he’d read her thoughts.

Amanda glanced quickly away. “Thank you for agreeing to see me, Dr. Dresden.”

“Call me Robin, Amanda.” He scratched his head, impatiently. “Doctor brings to mind white coats and antiseptic. Rolf’s told me you’re doing some sort of story.” His gaze was

uncomfortably direct. “My feeling is that art should be experienced, not dissected. You’ll forgive my lack of enthusiasm.”

“But surely you have an opinion on Gisèle’s death, and the future of the exhibition?”

“I don’t see that either is a matter of opinion.”

She flushed, in spite of herself. No wonder he got such mixed press. “Nevertheless, er... Robin, I promise I’ll only take a moment of your time.”

He didn’t answer her, but in what she took to be an encouraging way, since he was ushering her in. She caught the glint of a ring on his finger. Inwardly, she groaned. No wonder she was so attracted to him. But when his hand dropped she could see it wasn’t a wedding ring, but a platinum signet that winked in the shadows, engraved deeply with some symbol she couldn’t quite make out.

“It’s a lion. Rampant, regardant. A dagger in his dexter paw and a trefoil vert in the sinister. That’s for luck. Springing from a ducal crown. That’s for show.”

Realizing he’d seen her glance at his ring finger; she flushed red. “Sorry?”

He tipped his head. “Heraldry-speak. It’s a sort of family crest.”

“Sort of?”

He only smiled.

“And do you seal your letters in wax?”

“That’s why the engraving’s done in reverse.” She couldn’t be sure whether he was kidding her or not. His lips twitched, but then he turned to lead the way down the garden path, leaving the heavy gate to swing shut with a clang. And like a lamb in the lair of the heraldic lion, she followed.

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LUKE honked at a lunatic on a moped going the wrong way down a one-way street. *Damned tourists.* There was no parking on Front Street, as usual, but he knew of a permit-only lot that never checked permits. He found a space and walked down to the gallery, swinging the Dutch door wide and giving a nod to Rolf as he moved past the marble desk. The man was always on the phone.

It was the first time Luke had been there since Gisèle's death, and though she had never graced the walls he saw her everywhere. Spotlights trained on her face, on every inch of her body. It was ironic and a little sad; he'd never known anyone who liked being naked less than Gisèle. Now it was the only way he could ever seem to think of her.

Wiping the beads of sweat from his brow, he inhaled deeply. *You can do this*. Surely fate had willed it. He reached the office door at the rear of the gallery, and rapped with more assurance than he felt.

"Ah, Luke," Rolf said behind him, as he floated across the room and extended his hand.

Luke could barely tolerate Rolf's obsequious air, but he was a necessary evil. He had an unerring eye when it came to distinguishing buyers from browsers, and as Robin had once said, "He makes buying art feel like basic hygiene."

"You've missed Robin, I'm afraid. He's rarely here these days. How are you?" He spoke in soft empathetic tones. "You look so well." (A lie, Luke knew.) "I do hope we'll be able to organize something soon. You have no idea how many inquiries I've received about your paintings. In fact, you've just missed a reporter—"

"Christ." Luke grimaced. "You didn't give her my number, did you?"

"Naturally not, I took *her* contact information." And before Luke could protest, he was being handed the same, written on a sheet of elegant office stationery. He stuffed it blindly into his pocket. "She writes for *Reflex*, yet she seemed quite startled by the news of Gisèle's death. They've just printed a follow-up to last month's review. I don't know how she could have escaped it. In any case, Robin's agreed to talk to her. He'll know how best to handle it."

*How best to spin it*. Luke cleared his throat. "Has he indicated any kind of timeline to you?"

Rolf frowned. "No. But Gisèle was *so* supportive of the exhibition; my personal feeling is that she would want it to go on. He may recommend that you do the interview, Luke. It's an art magazine after all, not a rag. Perhaps it would be smart to cooperate."

Luke nodded, though his personal feeling was that Rolf wanted his commission. Trouble was, that made two of them.

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ROBIN Dresden led Amanda up a stairway unlike any she had ever seen; it spiraled dizzily and art lined the curving walls— a quick study of artistic periods from the Renaissance onward, (though this didn't dawn on her until the modern era, and the Dali part of the Monet-Cezanne-Matisse-Picasso-Dali sequence). They were only reproductions, of course; this was clear even with Amanda's limited knowledge of art— she was aware that the Mona Lisa was in the *Louvre*— but they were fine copies printed on canvas and framed, delicately lit by savage twisted iron sconces. By contrast, the stairs were formal and refined: highly polished dark cherry with a fine Persian runner. They went up three floors. At each landing, burnished wood doors led off to the right and left: "My students' rooms," Robin said.

She wondered what it was to be a student of his.

Another flight up. The room in which he led her was too luxuriously appointed to be called an office, though there was a kidney-shaped mahogany desk in such a state of elegant disarray that she glimpsed only a corner of the leather inlaid top. The room itself was a wide semi-circle and possessed none of the sterile asceticism of modern academic workspace. She felt rather like a novice stumbling upon the sacristy. Here the paintings were as thick as wallpaper and didn't appear to be reproductions: a daunting collage of figurative and abstract, classical and modern. Books covered any remaining wall space, and stood in stacks upon the floor.

Robin swept the disorder on his desk into one neat pile and indicated the chairs before him. One was a leather club chair, the other an overstuffed wingback. She chose the former, as she didn't like having her peripheral vision hindered, and she imagined Robin Dresden was over-accustomed to an audience perched at the edge of their seat. He'd gone to a bar in the corner of the room and was selecting from an array of crystal decanters and glasses on its surface. Beside her was an antique

table with inlaid wood in a geometric design; an old-fashioned kaleidoscope stood upright beside a leather bound tome of great size. It lay open, its language foreign. She caught the musty scent of yellowed pages, but doubted somehow that it was the Bible.

Another corner held a sculpture of a female nude. Along with a lush hanging plant, it lent a sensual quality to what otherwise had the air of an archaeologist's study, filled as it was with all manner of curious *objets d'art* she lacked the expertise to catalog.

And then all at once she understood.

It was in the analytical way he was studying her, like a shrink. She recognized the room as a stage with props, designed to trigger a response from the humble trespasser. In Robin Dresden's codex, each piece probably possessed revelatory power. Yes, now she saw the shapes: the masculine elements, the feminine, the empty spaces, the claustrophobic ones; metamorphosing images like a room of Rorschach inkblots. She had, she saw, chosen the masculine chair.

She met his eyes. "This room says a lot about you."

"And you." An ironic half-smile. "Would you care for a drink, Amanda?"

"Yes, thanks. Some water would be nice."

He turned to the bar. "I prefer scotch in mine; are you similarly inclined?"

"Oh. Er, no. Just ice." She heard the clink of ice against crystal, and then he handed her a tumbler and sat behind the desk with his scotch.

"Now. To your story, Amanda. I'd be very interested to hear it. You see, I know the editor at *Reflex* quite well and he has no writer called Amanda Miller on his staff."

"Oh. Well, I..." Amanda hesitated. "That's right, I'm not a staff writer. I'm only freelance. I should have said so at the gallery." She gave him her most ingenuous smile, ignoring the fact that her mouth felt like cotton. "The truth is I'd hoped to make an impression with this story."

Robin sipped his scotch. "I see."