

The background of the entire cover is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of an artist's palette and a paintbrush. The palette is covered in various colors of paint, including red, yellow, blue, and green. A paintbrush with a red handle and a dark ferrule is lying across the palette. The text is overlaid on this image.

SO MUCH

Fire

and

SO MANY

Plans

AARON S GALLAGHER

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This book is dedicated to the artists of the world.

The artists, *and* their Muses.

So Much Fire *and* So Many Plans

Aaron S Gallagher



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

“The main thing is to be moved, to love, to hope, to tremble, to live.”

-Auguste Rodin

“An artist never really finishes any work; he merely abandons it.”

- Paul Valéry

“Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.”

-Henry Ward Beecher

“Sex, painting, food, and talk. What else is there to life? And always necessarily in that order.”

-Christoph Ossirian

“I had so much fire in me, and so many plans.”

-Claude Monet

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PART ONE

Sfumato
(The manner of smoke)

CHAPTER ONE

New York City, May 15th, 1997

“That’s the first question everyone asks me,” Carolyn Delgado said. He was the fifth reporter in as many days to ask her the same questions. She had become tired of answering. Tired of speaking. Tired to her bones. The fatigue didn’t show in her voice. It remained husky, even, and low. Despite her heritage, her English was almost without accent.

The reporter, a sandy-haired young man of lean muscle and watery, unfocused eyes, said, “Oh. Well, can you tell me when you first met him?”

She stared at him through the threads of smoke from her forgotten cigarette. “And that’s the second question everyone asks me,” she said. She put the cigarette to her lips, drew in a final lungful of Egyptian tobacco, and crushed it into the clean saucer a waiter brought for her to use. Smoking was prohibited in Bellini’s, but Carolyn Delgado followed her own rules about that, as everything else. She shook out her hair. It was long now, past her shoulders, and if the chestnut brown was shot with thread of silver, at least she felt she’d earned them. She looked at herself in the reflection of the plate glass. Her hair was newly-coiffed, her makeup professionally-applied. She wore a simple dress the color of which was a halfway point between red and gray called ‘ashes of roses’, and had been designed for her. No woman in the world could own this particular dress for two years. Melo had assured her that he would keep it back until-

“Well, shit.” The reporter sat back. Rallying, he flipped his notes over. “Could you tell me what the final painting-”

“No.”

He blew a breath out through pursed lips. “Then I’m not sure why I’m here,” he confessed.

She shrugged one bare shoulder, the motion smooth, careless, but oddly sensual. “I didn’t ask you to lunch, my boy. You invited yourself. I didn’t have to agree.”

The reporter nodded. “Yes, and you’ve been very accommodating, Ms. Delgado, thank you. Aside from being completely unhelpful.”

She smiled at that. “Well said.”

The reporter grinned. “Thank you.”

The maître d’ approached, the waiter in tow. Tall, gaunt, and weathered, the prevailing theory held that Goodwin had arrived in the first shipment of dishes before Bellini’s had opened and now haunted the restaurant for all eternity, immortal so long as he remained on the premises.

“Ms. Delgado. A pleasure as always,” Goodwin’s diction, like his tuxedo, was impeccably-cut. He held himself regally, one arm behind his back, one in front of his waistcoat level with his watch chain. Carolyn felt certain you could lay a level on that arm and the bubble would fall perfectly within the lines.

“It’s wonderful to see you, Goodwin,” Delgado said, her rose-red lips bowing in a smile. “Thank you for accommodating me on short notice.”

“It was no bother, Miss,” Goodwin assured her. His eyes flicked to the reporter and back. “If you’d rather be alone?”

“No, it’s quite all right. The gentleman is my guest.”

Goodwin took in the recorder, the note pad, the expensive camera and the cheap suit coat. “Indeed. Welcome, sir. May I bring you both a drink?”

“My usual, please,” Carolyn said. “And... perhaps a cognac for the gentleman. Remy Martin, I should think.”

The reporter was about to object, but Goodwin had already nodded. “Excellent. Year?”

Carolyn looked the reporter up and down, nibbled her lip, and said, “’74.”

Goodwin’s lips quirked. “As you say. The chef’s special today is braised lamb and new potatoes with cream and Irish butter. The vegetable is carrot medallions and leek shoots.”

“It sounds lovely. We’ll have those, please,” Carolyn said, again over the younger man’s protest.

“You drink will arrive momentarily. Miss. Sir.” Goodwin bowed and took his leave. The waiter trailed behind. Goodwin took every order, carried nothing.

Carolyn looked around the busy dining room. They were in a table by the window, and the surrounding tables were empty despite the crowded room. Goodwin always kept a section open for what he called ‘friends of the establishment.’ She caught one or two angry looks, people bent out of shape about either her cigarettes or the view from the table out into the thoroughfare of Park Avenue West. She smiled to herself. There were few compensations in her life that satisfied to the bone anymore, but this was one.

“Perhaps it’s tiresome-” the reporter said began.

“It is,” she cut him off. “Tell me... I’ve forgotten your name. Forgive me.”

He gave her a half-smile. “Brent. Brent Metierra.”

“Well, then, Mr. Metierra, it’s tiresome in the extreme to have the same questions barked at me over and again until I simply want to scream. I haven’t answered anyone else’s intrusions. Why would I answer yours?” she asked, watching his eyes.

Metierra scratched his cheek. “Because I’m not asking for readers. I’m not asking for ratings. I love his work. You’re the foremost Ossirian authority. I want to know more.”

She didn’t answer immediately, but she reappraised him carefully. Goodwin returned, the waiter trailed behind carrying a tray. On the polished silver there sat a brandy balloon and a glass of Lillet Blanc with a slice of orange balanced on the surface. The disc of orange was thin enough to read through and might have been

made with a razor blade, so cleanly-cut were the edges. She accepted the flute from the tray and waited for Metierra to take his. She held her glass aloft, and he touched his rim to hers. She sipped first. She smiled up at Goodwin. "It's perfect, Goodwin. Thank you."

Goodwin bowed and retreated, the waiter hurrying to keep up. Metierra frowned after them. "He didn't wait to see if I liked mine," he noted.

She fixed him with a wry smile. "Goodwin knows that you wouldn't know if it's good or not."

"That's kind of snobbish, don't you think?"

"Taste it," she urged.

He sipped the smoky, smooth liquor. She noted that he didn't even put his nose into the glass first in order to heighten the taste. She won a bet against herself for that. "It's delicious," he said.

"Of course it is," she agreed, accommodating his enthusiasm. "But is it *good*?"

He said with a frown, "What's the difference?"

She looked away, a playful smile curving her lips. "If you knew, you'd know."

He colored, setting the drink on the table. "Fine. But back to--"

"You still haven't convinced me that I should talk to you and not one of your... more well-known associates," she said. "Or none of you at all." She picked up a handbag that cost more than his car had and fished inside. She produced a packet of the Egyptian cigarettes and a turquoise and silver lighter. She offered him the pack, but he shook his head. "I don't smoke," he said.

"You've never had to, then," she opined. She lit the cigarette and dragged deeply. She blew the smoke away from him, at her reflection in the glass. The plume curled and billowed, framing her in a sfumato of inky depth. She caught her own eyes in the reflection, the gray-green he'd been so enamored of.

"Don't you worry about cancer?" Metierra asked.

She gave him a cool glance. "Everyone has to die of something, my dear. The tragedy for most people is that it takes so damned long."

Goodwin walked the waiter, laden with plates, to their table. Upon seeing them, Carolyn crushed out her cigarette, though it was barely begun. She took the saucer from the table and set it on the floor near her chair.

Goodwin accepted each plate from the waiter and arranged them, the lady's meal first, the gentleman's afterward, and they were somehow more precisely placed on the table than either had ever seen. The simple white china had only a rim of thread-thin gold around the outside. The cutlery, wrapped in fine linen napkins, had this same thread of gold outlining each piece.

"Bon Appétit," Goodwin intoned. He waited while they each cut a small bite of the rare lamb and tasted it. Metierra's eyebrows climbed. Carolyn gave Goodwin the full force of her sultry, satisfied smile.

"Superb," she murmured. "Would you please give the chef my compliments? The mint is so delicate as to be subliminal. And the meat is beautifully buttery and succulent."

Goodwin inclined his head. "With pleasure, Miss."

They watched him glide effortlessly back to the kitchen. Carolyn sipped her Lillet, and ate some of the carrots and leeks. She sighed.

Metierra cocked his head. "Is there something wrong?"

She shook her head, and her eyes were far off. "Thinking only of distant lands, and far-off lovers, now long since gone." She gave him a quizzical look a brief smile. "How old are you, dear?"

He straightened a trifle self-consciously, and said, "I'm twenty-four."

"Ah," she breathed. "I remember twenty-four."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. She ate less than he did. Far less, in fact. She only nibbled at the lamb and vegetables, enough to be polite. At last each had set the silver at ten and two on the plates. As if summoned by witchcraft Goodwin appeared and supervised the waiter's retrieval of the dishes.

"A second drink, perhaps? Or an aperitif? And shall you take dessert, Ms. Delgado?" he asked.

She gave the questions serious consideration, only to shake her head. "No, thank you, Goodwin. I have a flight in..." she checked her watch with a frown, "...barely an hour."

"As you say, Ms. Delgado."

She reached into her bag and retrieved a leather wallet with a gold clasp. She opened it and removed a mirror-black rectangle of thick plastic. She handed it to Goodwin, who accepted it and bowed. He retreated.

"An hour?" Metierra asked. "You didn't mention-"

"I didn't know you," she said. "And it wasn't any of your business."

"You still don't really know me," he pointed out. "Why *did* you ask me to lunch?"

She gave him a look of extreme patience. "You're too young to understand that of all the myriad hells we must suffer through the years, dining alone is nearly at the top of that cruel list."

He was silent. And then he said, "What's the number one?"

She gave him an indolent smile. "Sleeping alone, of course."

Her eyes were bright and seemed to penetrate to his core. He colored, bright spots appearing on his cheeks.

"I see. May I ride with you to the airport?" he asked. "I'd still like to ask you questions-"

"Convince me, dear," she said as she retrieved her bag and placed the cigarettes and lighter within. "You have three minutes until Goodwin returns and I leave."

Metierra, to his credit, did not gush an answer, hurrying platitudes and insincerity into the air between them. He gave it thirty seconds of thought.

He said, "I love his work, but I have never felt I understood it. And in trying to understand him, I hope to be able to better appreciate the work. Even if only for myself."

He sat back and watched her, holding his breath.

She kept her eyes on his as she retrieved her glass and upended it, swallowing the last of the Lillet. She set the glass down and said, "Do you have a passport?"

"Uh, yes," he said, confused.

"With you?"

He pursed his lips, patted his bag, and reached inside. He produced his battered passport. "As it happens, I do. I got back from London a week ago. In fact, I landed just as the story broke—"

"How can you possibly understand the work unless you understand the man? And how can you understand the man unless you understand the origins of that man? The places that built him. The people that heated the unfinished steel, the hammers that peened it. The waters that quenched it, giving it the temper, the resiliency, the rigidity?"

Metierra shrugged. "I can't. Even if I did those things, I couldn't."

"Then what good is the attempt?"

He grinned. "Because dim understanding is better than no understanding. And it's not about succeeding, it's about *trying*. Failing on the way to a goal isn't failure."

A shadow seemed to flicker through her dark eyes. She cleared her throat. "That was very well-said."

He inclined his head.

Goodwin returned with an enormous leather folder. He presented it. Carolyn took it from him and opened it. She held up a hand as Goodwin offered her an ornate black fountain pen. She scribbled at the page, signed with a flourish, and handed both pen and closed folder to Goodwin. She tucked the credit card away. Metierra realized he hadn't seen Goodwin actually give her the card.

She rose, and he did too. She put a hand on Goodwin's arm, a tiny gesture, a delicate touch. "Thank you, Goodwin. For everything you've done for me. Goodbye, my friend."

Goodwin studied her lidded, remote eyes. "Ah," he murmured. "Not 'au revoir', then."

"I very much think not," she said.

Metierra watched her, the crease between his eyes deepening.

Goodwin took her hand in his and bent over it, giving her a soft, lingering kiss. He looked up over her hand and whispered, "Ms. Delgado, adieu."

He straightened. She put a hand to his cheek, but said nothing more. Picking up her bag she walked to the door of the restaurant. Metierra said, "Mr. Goodwin—"

"Sir may call me 'Goodwin,'" the elegant maître d' intoned.

"Oh. Thank you. Uh... Goodwin, what just happened?"

Goodwin would never level a withering stare at a guest, but he could give the impression that he would. The air seemed to grow thick with rebuke.

"It just... it sounded like she was saying goodbye. For... you know... forever."

Goodwin nodded. "As you say, sir."

“And that doesn’t alarm you?” he asked. He watched Carolyn Delgado pause at the door, saying something to the doorman, who signaled one of his runners. She looked over her shoulder at him, waiting.

““There comes an end to all things,”” Goodwin quoted.

Metierra looked away from Delgado to Goodwin’s impassive face. “Shakespeare?”

Goodwin gave the barest shake of his head. “Stevenson, sir.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Goodwin.”

“You are most welcome, sir.”

Metierra hurried after Delgado. He caught up just as her car had been pulled up to the bottom of Bellini’s wide marble stairs. He followed her to the car, where the driver opened the door for them. It seemed too bright to be a Tuesday, and too warm to be only the end of May. He could feel the summer crowding in, shouldering its way between the buildings to rush up and smother them.

He watched her fold herself elegantly into the car, the dress sliding away from her legs. He swallowed and climbed in after, feeling like an ape clambering into the embrace of the leather seats of the car. The door closed after him, and he found himself side-by-side with her.

This close, he realized she looked nearly as flawless near as she had at a distance. He didn’t know her age- no one did. The records were conflicting, and in no less than eleven official records her birth day, date, and month were all different- but she had lived in the public eye for forty years. She looked nothing like her age would suggest. She looked a smart forty, perhaps, give or take a day.

She watched him looking at her. He realized she seemed to know what he was thinking. Her eyes held some kind of knowledge, a secret or a hint of something unknown to him. He dropped his eyes, embarrassed to have been caught staring. Her lips curved in a smile. The partition lowered. She said without looking away from Metierra, “The airport please, Charles.”

“At once, Ms. Delgado.”

The partition closed with only a whisper and they were moving.

His eyes came up and were focused on her lips as they parted and she said, “You’ve been following me.”

He looked up at her, shocked. “I-I don’t know-”

“Come now, dear. You’re clever, but not that clever. I’ve seen you outside the hotel, the television studio, my bank, and the deli yesterday,” she said. “You’re following me, but you don’t seem to be taking pictures.”

“Everyone knows what you look like,” he said. It was an unselfconscious answer, an honest answer.

She smiled again. “You’re an interesting boy, aren’t you?”

“Not really,” Brent said. “I’m just a reporter.”

“You’re no reporter,” she chastised. She pursed her lips, considered something, and said to him, “You’ve turned down offers at three different magazines and two newspapers in the last two years. You insist on staying at *Objet*, making a trivial sum, when you could be working much higher profile

stories as the face of modern art criticism.”

He said thoughtfully, “Ms. Delgado, you claimed you didn’t know who I am.”

She gave him silence as an answer.

“You claimed to have forgotten my name,” he persisted.

She waited, watching him. Her eyes were veiled, but he thought he saw lively humor behind them. “Do you really think I don’t know everyone of importance in the art world, Mr. Metierra?”

“Am I important?”

She considered. “Somewhat. Your opinion matters to those who matter.”

He looked out the window as the bridge glided past the car, shadows and light playing over his face. He frowned. “Where are we going?”

“The airport, dear,” she said, sounding distracted. He looked around. She had opened the mini bar and was in the midst of pouring herself a drink. He squinted at the label on the bottle. It was in Portuguese, her native language. The yellow liquor gave off a strong aroma. She didn’t pour herself a civilized drink, she filled the glass almost to the rim. She handed him the bottle without looking and took a deep drink from the glass. He sniffed the mouth of the bottle. “What the hell is *trago de Caña*?”

“This is rum, more or less,” she said. “I always have a bottle or two around. It reminds me of home.” She drained half the glass and leaned back, snuggling her shoulders against the seat. She tilted her head down and looked up at him through her lashes. “It’s never good to forget where you come from.”

“Ecuador?” he asked.

“You say it as though you *don’t* know, Brent,” she said. She swirled the liquor in the glass, eyes never leaving his. “As though you didn’t do your research beforehand.”

He shrugged a shoulder and raised the bottle. He sipped, and nearly choked. His cheeks bulged and he clapped a hand over his mouth. He slitted his eyes as he swallowed. He coughed. “What the *hell* is *trago de Caña*?” he asked again.

Her smile widened. “Fermented cane sugar. As I said, it’s more or less rum. There’s some ginger in there, and lemon, and a dash of grenadine. It’s the way they make it in my village.”

“Powerful,” he said.

Again that smile. “Between 20% and 40% alcohol.”

She sipped at her glass, a sigh escaping her lips after she had swallowed. He stared at her. His mind raced, but he couldn’t think of a place to start.

“What’s your favorite piece?” she asked him suddenly.

Startled, he said, “*The House of Many Hearts*.”

Her lips twisted and she appeared to taste something foul. “Of course it is. Everyone thinks it’s beautiful.”

Nettled, he said, “It *is* beautiful.”

“No, it isn’t. You only *think* it’s beautiful.”

“Is there a difference?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Naturally, you dear idiot.”

"I'm not sure I believe that," Brent said. He looked down at the bottle, raised it, and took another sip. He swallowed and coughed again. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say."

"I refuse to believe that you believe that," she said. "I've read your work. Your eye is surprisingly erudite."

He snorted. "You've read my work?"

"Every issue of *Objet* is in my Library," she explained. "I've read them all."

He grew solemn. "Your Library."

"Yes," she said.

He didn't ask anything else. *Impressive*, she thought. *He's dying to know, and yet he's afraid to push me.*

He said, "Why do you think *House* isn't beautiful?"

"Because I was there."

"When he painted it?"

She smiled to herself, and it was a smile filled with something bitter, something sad. "Yes. You could say that."

He bit his lip. She watched his hesitancy, reading him avidly like a book. His face was endearingly open, his thoughts plain on his lips and in his eyes. *It is refreshing*, she thought, *to look at a man and see him as he is.*

"*House* is his most popular painting," Brent said. "It's beloved the world over. The lines to see it in person are always out the doors."

"In my experience, most people have no idea what art is."

He let that pass. "The canvas is such an odd shape, but he never talked about it. Can you tell me why?"

"You can stop asking me questions," she said. "I won't answer them. I never have. *He* didn't. I won't. Not about the work."

She saw the reporter in him surge forward, a hound scenting a hare. "Not about the work, you say?"

She felt the bite of the rum deep in her belly, and swallowed more from the glass. "As I said," she agreed.

"Tell me why he donated it to the public trust after being offered thirty million dollars for it, then?"

She smiled at him. "You aren't ready to believe me."

"When will I be?"

"That depends on how stringent you are in your beliefs," she said. "How devout you are to the cult of culture."

"I've got the training to read art," he said. "And I have my own ideas about what makes art. My masters-"

"I'm aware," she said. "But does being an academic allow you to think freely about art, or are you even more narrow-minded about what 'art' is?"

She air-quoted with two fingers as she said it, and he smiled. "A little of column A and a little of column B. *House*, for instance, with the thousand shades of white providing only hints and suggestions, is, on the face of it, a pretentious piece of self-indulgent garbage masquerading as innovation. But once you see it

in person and realize that in addition to the use of various whites for shade and shape that he used the brush strokes themselves as hints and suggestions,” he told her. “I didn’t like it at first, but I’ve come to the conclusion that it may be the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen done on canvas. In fact, done *with* canvas. The unusual shape of his canvas itself, with those broken angles and the arch-”

“Stop, please,” she muttered, and he broke off. She tossed the remainder of her drink into her mouth and swallowed. “I’ve never been able to stomach the praise and adoration. It’s sycophantic. *He* believed as much.”

The car slowed as it wound its way through the labyrinthine terminal parking. They stopped at a checkpoint that Brent had never seen. The driver passed a laminated pass to the guard, who checked it and handed it back. The arm rose and they proceeded into a part of La Guardia that Brent knew of, but only through reading.

The private air fields at La Guardia were accessible only by passing the single checkpoint on the north end of the airport. They rolled smoothly past several private hangers to park before a small building. After a moment the driver opened the door and Brent got out. He turned and offered Carolyn his hand, which she took and he helped her out of the car’s luxurious depths. She walked briskly to the small outbuilding, and he hurried to keep up. She had very long legs and her heels clocked on the tarmac rapidly and she strode to the door. He managed to get there a half second before she did and he opened it for her. She gave him a nod and went inside. He followed after, feeling foolish for having tried to be gallant. He thought he was probably coming off more like a puppy, eager and wiggly, without much restraint, and too oblivious to understand what he was getting into.

In the outbuilding there were two clerks seated at desks. She approached the first, retrieving a leather folder from her bag. “Carolyn Delgado and guest. My flight plan shows a 2 p.m. departure.”

“One moment, Miss Delgado,” the man said. He looked at Brent.

“Uh... Brent Metierra,” he said.

The man gave him three seconds of silence before saying, “Passport?”

“Oh,” Brent said. He fished in his bag and found his passport. He handed to the man. “Sorry.”

“A moment while I check these. Have you anything to declare?”

“No,” Delgado told him.

“Fruits, vegetables, animals?”

“No.”

“Luggage?”

“No,” she said.

The man didn’t react to that, and Brent had to assume that flying on a private jet was indeed a different experience. After checking their passports at the computer, the man returned them. “You’re clear to depart, Miss Delgado. Have a safe flight.”

“Thank you, Michael.”

Brent followed her back to the car, and Charles drove them to the last hangar

past the rest where a Gulfstream G5 awaited them. The stairs were down, and a woman awaited them in a pilot's uniform. Charles opened the door for them a final time. Carolyn pressed his hand with both of hers.

"Thank you for your perfect service, Charles. Goodbye."

Again, that strange finality. Brent shivered at her voice.

Charles bowed to her. "Goodbye, Ms. Delgado. It has been a pleasure."

She led Brent to the stairs of the plane. As they approached, the engines whined and began to spin up.

"Louise," Carolyn greeted the pilot. "How are we faring today?"

"Never better, Ms. Delgado. Preflight is complete, the board is green, we're expecting our runway in ten minutes," the pilot said. She looked over at Brent. Brent smiled.

Looking back to Carolyn she said, "Two legs, Ms. Delgado. We will land in Brasilia in approximately seven hours. Refuel will take approximately thirty minutes, and just over two hours from Brasilia to São Paulo. Total flight time is just under ten hours, barring weather. The reports show nothing concerning. We received the catering a short time ago. Chef Branchi sends his regards, as well as far too much food, as usual."

"Come now, Louise. One can never have too much Lobster Newberg."

Louise smiled. "You wouldn't say that if you'd loaded it out as I did, Ms. Delgado. And besides, he sent steaks, eggs, and baked Alaska as well."

"I assume it came with the usual warning?" Delgado asked.

"Chef Branchi cannot be held responsible for travel damage to the Alaska," Louise said in an oft-repeated singsong.

"Naturally not," Delgado said.

"Have you luggage, Ms. Delgado?"

"No, Louise," Delgado said. "Neither myself nor Mr. Metierra have luggage."

If this disturbed Louise, the pilot didn't show it. She gestured up the stairs. "Please, right this way. Shall you have a drink before takeoff?"

Delgado considered. "Have we a bottle of Château d'Yquem aboard?"

"Of course," the pilot assured her. "The '95, the '83, and '67. They arrived with the Gironde green oysters. Shall I prepare a platter?"

"Please," Delgado said. She gave Brent an amused glance. "Oysters and wine, Brent?"

"Oh, if you insist," he said, gamely playing along.

"Very well," Louise agreed. Delgado led Brent up the stairs and into the cabin. Louise trailed behind. As you entered into the body of the plane a small kitchenette lay behind a half-wall, between the cockpit and the main cabin, across from a closed forward bathroom. The spacious cabin of the Gulfstream had originally held seating for up to twenty, but the cabin had been rebuilt. The forward cabin seated ten comfortably, in wide, plush chairs, any of which, when reclined, would make a suitable sleeping couch. The furthest portion of the cabin had been isolated with walls and an ornate door. Through the door he could see a queen-sized bed, freshly-made. The interior was decorated with paintings in

curved frames designed to attach to the walls of the fuselage. Brent realized with dim alarm she had three Picassos and a pair of Matisse. Somehow, he didn't think they were copies.

Delgado sat in the second seat, next to the window on the right side. He sat across from her, wondering what the protocol was on a private jet.

I don't have any clothes, he thought. Or money. Or anything else you take on a trip. This is nuts. I'm supposed to be back at the magazine tomorrow.

He'd have to call. He realized with alarm there was a phone on his seat. He looked but saw no place to swipe his credit card. He laughed at himself. It was a private plane. The first he'd been on.

Delgado looked away from the window and gave him a speculative look.

"Sorry," he said. "A little at sea."

She gave him a tired smile. "It happens."

Louise came back to them with a tray of drinks and a plate of half-shelled oysters, chilled and brimming with saltwater. "Your refreshments," she said. "We're set for wheels-up in five minutes." She set the tray down and went back to the cockpit, stopping to close and seal the door.

"She's remarkably capable, your pilot," he noted.

"I insist on the fewest staff possible," Delgado told him. "They're trained in several disciplines. Louise happens to be a wonderful chef. I sent her to the Cordon Bleu for a year. She's also an excellent tailor."

"She does three jobs for you? That's frugal."

Delgado arched an eyebrow. "Do not be uncouth, Mr. Metierra. Louise draws a salary equivalent to the best in her field. *All* of them. I demand impeccable, impossible service. I pay gladly for what I want. You do not engage the best with less-than-best wages."

"I apologize," he said, "if I sounded rude. It wasn't my intention. I'm not used to this kind of... of life."

She gave him a wan smile. "It tires quickly, as does anything after too long."

"Hard to imagine," he said, gesturing at the plate of oysters.

"I don't need to imagine it. I've had a lifetime of this kind of service. It palls."

"I'll take your word for it," he said. "I'll have to. It's unlikely I'll ever reach a fraction of the height at which you operate."

"But you're here now," she said.

"I'm here now," he agreed. "So I'm going to enjoy it. And thank you, Ms. Delgado, for your hospitality, whatever the reason for it."

Delgado picked up a flute and handed it to Brent.

"Is this something else I'm not qualified to have an opinion about?" he asked archly.

She laughed merrily. "I apologize, my dear. That was somewhat cruel of me. I had no idea you would be interesting when I played that mean trick on you."

"I'm interesting?" he asked. "That's good. I've lain awake nights wondering. What gave me away?"

"You didn't ask me why I wanted to know if you had a passport, nor did you

ask where we were going. That's interesting to me."

"Why?"

"It tells me," she said, sitting sideways to face him, crossing her legs and smoothing the dress down, "that you're more concerned with knowing answers than the mundanities of life. You've a deeper focus than some."

He sipped the wine. "Some things are more important than others. Some things aren't important at all."

She stared at him, her eyes opaque. "It's something *he* would have said."

"I'm pretty sure he *did*," Brent admitted.

Her eyes glittered. "How would you know? He never gave an interview."

"I've been following his career my whole life," Brent said, "since college, at least. He's the reason I became an art history major."

The glittering interest in her eyes seemed to die. "Perhaps you're not as interesting as I thought," she murmured.

"Because I'm a follower of his work?"

"Because you let your path be chosen instead of choosing it."

He sipped the wine. It was complex and seemed to shift flavors periodically. It was hard for him to understand what he was tasting. She said, "Have an oyster before your next sip."

He eyed the oysters dubiously. "I've never really-"

"Trust me," she said.

They began to move, the gentle lurch of motion setting the wine in their glasses to moving. He looked around at the tray. "There's no silverware."

She picked up one of the shells and tipped the oyster into her mouth. Her eyes closed as she savored the bite of the seawater and the silk of the oyster. She chased it with a sip of the wine.

Following her example, he did the same. The seawater was salty on his tongue, the oysters were vivid and full of a wild verdant spark of flavor, but the texture reminded him of okra imperfectly cooked. Before he could gag, he sipped the wine.

The flavors combined in a sensory explosion, the seawater seemed to electrify, the oyster's flavor became a muted backdrop, and the wine suddenly became sweet as sugar, with a complexity of fruit and leather notes. His eyes popped open and he stared down at the oysters. "God... *damn*."

She laughed merrily. "Lovely boy."

He looked up guiltily. "Sorry for my language. I just-"

"It's perfectly okay. So many people I associate with have lost the spark of excitement that is produced when one rubs against the divine. It's refreshing to see an honest reaction."

"I've never had an oyster," he admitted.

"How is it that you've never had an *oyster*?" she asked, sipping her wine. "You've been to every gallery show in Manhattan, haven't you?"

"I avoid the food and drink at the shows," he said. "I know too many disgruntled catering workers."

She blinked, and burst into gales of laughter, her head back, her hair cascading along her shoulders and the slopes of her breasts like water in a tide pool lapping and retreating. “A wise decision, I’m sure,” she said.

“This is the captain,” Louise announced over the intercom. “We’ve been cleared for takeoff. If you’ll please fasten your seatbelts, we’ll be in the air shortly.”

He noted that even the intercom on a private jet worked differently. Louise’s voice had been clear as if they were next to one another conversing about the weather. The plane jostled them, and began to move smoothly. He looked out the window to his left and decided the view didn’t matter. He looked at Carolyn Delgado, who he found was gazing back at him.

“São Paulo,” he said, more for anything to say than as a conversational enjoiner.

“Yes,” she said. “I felt a need for the oppressive, almost desperate energy of São Paulo. Most of the people who live in Brazil seem to crowd into the cities. You’ll find yourself shoulder-to-shoulder almost constantly. It’s a city I find myself impossible to feel alone in, because I am surrounded by the press of bodies. It’s of a comfort to me, and I find I need comforting just now.”

He nodded and sipped his drink. “I’ve never been,” he said.

“Of course you haven’t. I can see it on you.”

“What does that mean?”

She shrugged. “Nothing in particular. São Paulo leaves an indelible mark on the soul, Mr. Metierra. Like the wind etching stones in a canyon. It reveals the darker, harder minerals inside of us all.”

“It sounds interesting.”

“It’s dreadful. That’s how interesting it is.” She turned to her own window.

“Then why go?”

“I told you already. I don’t want to feel alone.”

Her shoulder and back seemed to radiate the vibration of irritation, or maybe it was the plane as it rolled along the tarmac. The engines wound up and the surge of power pushed him back into the seat. After a short burst, they were in the air, the plane rising from the nose and tilting toward her side. He reached out and steadied the tray of oysters. His drink and her drink were safely in hand. She emitted anger like heat, but she tilted the glass upward and drained it. As they approached apogee she reached out without looking and set the glass on the table. As the base touched the table, the plane levelled out.

As though it knew she wanted to set the glass down, he thought. He let the tray go and watched her. He realized she was watching him in the reflection of the window. *She likes reflections,* he thought.

“I apologize, Brent. Please forgive my manners. It continues to surprise me. I find myself remembering at the strangest moments.”

“That he’s gone.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” she said. She looked over her shoulder at him. “I didn’t expect it. And now that it’s happened, I can’t get used to it.”

"It was a shock," he said, more for anything to say than for the conversation. "He didn't like to drive, I'm told."

"No, he didn't. So far as I know, he never even got his license. I'd never seen him behind the wheel of a vehicle. What possessed him to—" she broke off. "It doesn't matter now, I suppose. It's over."

"At least it was quick," he offered.

She fixed him with a withering glare. "You're shit trying to comfort someone."

"I don't get a lot of practice."

"No wife or girlfriend?"

"Not even a cat."

She gave him the barest smile. "Cats are too much like painters," she said. "They only pay attention when they want or need something. The rest of the time they do exactly what they wish and to hell with the world."

"Most people are either cat people or dog people," he said. "But I'm neither. I'm not opposed to animals, I just don't feel any particular draw. People are much the same to me. So no, no wife."

"But surely you have family."

"Oh, somewhere, I guess. We don't have much use for one another."

"You don't sound bitter."

"No, I don't. It took a couple years before I stopped sounding bitter. But all the bills are paid off. I don't owe them anything, they don't owe me anything. We're quits."

"I wonder what that must be like."

"It's a pretty good life, if you came from what I came from. It's a pretty empty life if you didn't," he told her.

She crossed her legs and smoothed out the dress. She gave him a flat look. "You think it's good? Or you think it's empty?"

"I can see it going either way. Sometimes it's both."

She nodded. "I often wonder about people who choose to see the world as black-and-white forever, deciding that, for once and all, this is how they feel about a thing. As though we aren't different people every day. Even from moment to moment."

He smiled at her, and she noticed that his face lit up when he smiled. His eyes brightened, the corners crinkled, his lips parted, and his teeth showed. More, his entire body seemed to shift. It felt happier when he smiled. Something subliminal about the way he moved. "Exactly! I don't know how I'll feel about *asparagus* tomorrow, let alone whether I like or hate my parents. And asparagus isn't *complicated*. How you can just stop feeling about things is a mystery to me. Picking one feeling to define one thing, forever and ever, amen. It's lunacy."

She stared at him, unsettled. It's a thing that Christoph had said often, when thinking about the nature of emotion, as he had almost constantly. Brent didn't resemble Christoph. Not in face or body. But his soul, she decided, was of a kind. She had seen him outside the restaurant, waiting patiently for a chance to ask a

simple question, and she had been jolted by that recognition. That... connection. She had asked him to lunch because of that bolt of recognition, and his questions had cemented her decision within seconds. Before they'd ordered food, she knew she would be collecting him and dragging him after her, the flotsam caught in the wake of a ship's passage. She would have to remember to make arrangements with Louise to return him to New York after-

She pressed a button on the panel by her chair. A moment later Louise emerged and refilled their glasses. She smiled at both of them and went back to the cockpit. Brent watched her walk away, and then sipped more of his wine.

They banked to the left a little, and climbed. After the plane levelled out, he asked her, "Have you ever been married? The records are... inconsistent."

She gave him that wan smile again. "I imagine they are. I did my best to make them so. And no, I've never been married. Legally, at any rate."

"Why not?"

She noticed he didn't ask the obvious questions. She appreciated that about him. Her instinct outside the restaurant had been right, not that it mattered. When he walked up next to her as she strode toward the doors of Bellini's, he hadn't asked her any obvious questions. The only two questions he asked were 'Will you stay in the city?' and 'May I ask your opinion?'

He could have asked any number of inane asides about her past with Christoph, or the foundation, or even the mystery painting, but instead he focused on her. She wondered if that were a reporter's trick, or his natural intellect, or empathy, or both. Perhaps, as was the question of emotional flux, it varied.

"The man I loved didn't believe in marriage," she told him, sipping her wine.

He picked up another oyster, tipped it into his mouth, and chased it with a sip of wine, shaking his head at the burst of flavors. She watched his lips as he licked them. He said, "How did you feel?"

She cocked her head. "About?"

"About the man you loved not believing in marriage?" he asked. "When you found out he had died, I mean."

She seemed to receive an electric shock from his question. She gave a tiny start when he said it. She recovered well, saying tartly, "What makes you think that Ossirian was the man I loved?"

He sipped his wine and didn't respond. She raised her glass, acknowledging the point he had scored. "I felt nothing- about marriage. It wasn't the kind of thing you lament."

"You were with him for almost forty years."

"So were a great many other people," she pointed out. "He was a very great lover of people. There was room in his heart for everyone."

"Even Toefler?"

She leaned back and appraised him. "Why would you ask? Surely you *know* how they felt about one another."

Her tone seemed to him to imply that he not only did not, that he *very* much did not know what he thought he knew.

"I know what was in the press. Twenty years of rivalry, jabs, and attacks. They were bitter enemies. Very publicly," Brent said.

She gave him cool look. "*The House of Many Hearts*," she said, "is forged of the same fabric as Ossirian's and Toefler's very public relationship."

He frowned, taking his time with that. "So they weren't adversaries?"

"My dear, Hans Toefler might have been the truest friend Ossirian ever had in his life. Certainly the best friend an artist could ever want for. Toefler pushed him beyond his tolerances. Drove him to experiment at dizzying, suicidal heights. Hans Toefler forced Ossirian to *become* Christoph Ossirian at a time when he wasn't sure how to *be* Christoph Ossirian," Carolyn explained.

"I'm not sure I understand? The vitriol and harassment?"

"Dear boy, you've never had an arch enemy, have you?"

"No," he admitted. "Do you think I should?"

She bared her teeth at him, not quite a smile. It was more predatory. "Nothing brings out the hidden depths of your soul so much as an unrelenting, passionate hatred for another. You'll stoop to any depth, soar to any height, in your effort to defeat them. It is illuminating. You see things of yourself you never would have guessed. Hatred becomes love, anger becomes happiness. Enemies who reveal ourselves to ourselves are no longer enemies. How could they be, when they give you so much of yourself?"

"They were friends?"

"Of a sort," Carolyn said. "Toefler knew what Ossirian needed, even if Ossirian didn't. By the time they met, Ossirian was... well, *Ossirian*. He was already becoming famous, already becoming rich. Every painting he'd exhibited to that time had sold. Everything he touched turned to gold. Every lover he wanted fell at his feet. He had everything in the world. And then he met Toefler."

"I've never felt Toefler's work has as much emotional depth as Ossirian's," Brent confessed. "He seemed to be what you *claim* Ossirian was. A spoiled-by-success brat. A kind of..."

He broke off. "You're *kidding*," he breathed.

She watched him without speaking.

"He was playing a *part*?" Metierra asked. "A foil? On purpose?"

She said in a flat voice, "There is no man or woman on this planet who loved and valued and appreciated more than Hans Toefler Ossirian's work. He feels that Christoph's work is as important as Rembrandt or Vermeer, and as sublime. But Ossirian didn't work well when he was content. He needed restlessness, he needed contention, he needed conflict. Emotional upheaval."

"Did he know what-" Brent broke off, mind racing. "No," he said softly, as the implication struck him. "He wouldn't have, would he?"

Delgado's manicured eyebrow arched.

Brent explained his thoughts. "Ossirian wouldn't have known what Toefler was doing. Otherwise, it wouldn't have worked."

"Very good, Mr. Metierra," she said with a genuine smile.

"Toefler... must have *loved* Ossirian."

“You don’t think it was about the painting?”

Brent frowned. “Not if it was a rivalry. He’d have reveled in the failure of someone so celebrated as Ossirian, perhaps. But if you factor love into the relationship, it seems obvious.”

“Not to everyone,” Delgado said. “In fact, to no one.”

Brent marveled at the simplicity of the realization. “Love,” he mused. “Love makes us want the object of our affection to be the best they can be, to achieve whatever they want, to be what they aspire to. And true love... true love is that unselfish desire of what’s best for someone else, even if it—”

“Even if it isn’t *you*.”

Brent scowled. “Toefler gave an interview two hours after Ossirian’s body was identified. He was insufferable. He was... he was *disgusting*. Vulgar. Insulting to the man’s memory.”

“Ossirian would have approved,” Delgado said. “Hans knows that Christoph believed in nothing. He had no thought for what would come after his death. He didn’t believe any part of us lives on. That was one of the reasons Ossirian yielded to temptation so completely; he knew it would not come round again. As for Hans Toefler, anything Hans says is not directed at *Christoph*. It’s directed at the world that chose to lose him.”

Metierra’s face showed the complex series of realizations as he encapsulated what she had revealed to him. She watched him carefully, but he reached for neither recorder nor paper for notes. He turned and stared out the window, brow furrowed in thought. She finished her wine and then his. He didn’t seem to notice.

He was still looking out the window an hour later as they banked over the gulf. He shook himself, seemed to see the horizon for the first time, and reached for his wine. He discovered it empty. “How long was—”

“An hour,” she said, and leaned over to touch his cheek. “It’s interesting, isn’t it, how perspective and relation change the core of what we know?”

“I had no idea that- I mean, it’s obvious when you have all the pieces. But... did *Ossirian* really not know?”

She gave him a brilliant Smile. “*That* is an excellent question.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I *am* telling you. Just not in simple words or monochrome concepts,” she told him patiently.

“Why?”

She took his second meaning, rather than the first, most obvious one. “Because you seem to really wish to know. You want it for yourself. You’re passionate about it. I enjoy passion. It’s the only emotion that I think is worthwhile.”

“Passion?” he asked. “Not love, or loyalty, or empathy?”

She shook her head so that her hair cascaded around her face. “Never. Passion is why life exists. Passion is why life has meaning. Passion gives rise to those lesser emotions, but they are effect, not cause. If I have a god, it is passion.”

“But—”

"If you do not mind," Delgado interrupted, "I'd like to take a short nap. The day was tiring and I prefer to be rested for dinner."

"Oh," he said. "Of course. Shall I..." he looked around. "I can move."

"It's fine. Silence is all I require. You may read or do whatever amuses you." With that she reclined her seat, pushed a button, and the cabin grew darker. He could still see well enough to read, but the dimness was more intimate. He took a paperback out of his bag and settled in. He'd been meaning to read it for a while now. He considered jotting notes, but he wasn't sure yet what he would write. If Toefler had hidden his affection for Ossirian, was it his right to reveal it?

He stared at the pages without seeing them.

Christoph Ossirian had lorded over the art world, a lion amongst the gazelles, for forty-odd years. Ever since his discovery in in São Paulo in 1962-

Brent looked up. He stared thoughtfully at Carolyn Delgado. She was perfectly still, her head back, her eyes closed, her lips pressed together.

Would she tell me, finally, the answers to the questions everyone has? Where he came from? How he got to Brazil? Why he gave away The House of Many Hearts? Certainly he hadn't needed the money. When his first canvas sold, it cemented his position in the art world as, well, as Ossirian. He was wealthy immediately, on an order few artists ever see, but he never seemed to notice or care. But giving away House seems like overkill.

He put the book away and took out his research notebook. He had carried the thick book for ten years and slowly had amassed a detailed file on Christoph Ossirian. His movements, his work, his ideals. Every press clipping. His comments to reporters. While it was true Ossirian never gave an interview, he could always be counted on to hold forth when the press crowded around. It was close to a thousand pages thick now, bulging, and the front third of the Ossirian journal was still blank. Each of the first fifty pages held only a single line. A question about Christoph Ossirian. The pages were set aside for the answers. The answers which had never come.

Page one's question. The big question. The most mysterious question. Brent stared at his familiar handwriting, and realized that the reporter that had written it more than a decade ago was a completely different person. He was still struggling to finish his dissertation. Still scraping for a living. He'd managed to worm his way into the Art Institute in Chicago as a volunteer, eventually staying long enough to catch onto the acquisitions department, which had afforded him a meager stipend. In his spare time between tracking the parentage and affirming the pedigree of the Institute's purchases, donations, and the assorted flotsam that the gravity of such a place emanated, he had studied each of the fourteen Ossirians the Institute's collection boasted. He'd been breathless at each unveiling. The loops and whorls of Ossirian's pigments always moved something within him that no other painter ever had. To him, Ossirian was the explanation for the eternal mystery: what *is* painting for?

He ran a finger over the first question. He stared into space as he considered it.

How the *hell* had Christoph Ossirian gotten from Wilmot, Wisconsin to São Paulo, Brazil? How had a seventeen-year-old boy managed to travel 5300 miles and cross countless borders with no papers, in the six months between his foster parents reporting him truant from school and him turning up in São Paulo at an art show?

He stared at the page, wondering if he'd ever truly know. Certainly, Delgado had some answers. But she was acting very flaky. Very... not okay. He'd known more than a few junkies in his time, and they all tended to get like this eventually. They spun faster and faster until they burned out in the heat of their own friction, unable to slow their descent into an incandescent explosion, a meteor that flames out and is reduced to ash in the upper atmosphere of life. She had seemed to tell the waiter, Goodwin, at Bellini's, goodbye. Not 'so long.' Goodbye. As in *I'm not coming back*. She'd said as much to her driver when they had arrived at the airport.

She had seemed to admit to him that Christoph Ossirian had been the love of her life, despite never marrying him.

And Ossirian was dead.

Pollock would have been proud of you, Brent thought. Wiping out on the road between New York and the Hamptons. Wet night, shitty conditions. Alcohol in your system, likely, although the autopsy was inconclusive. You burned for three hours before they found you. Had to use your teeth to prove it was you. Had to send away to your old dentist in Wilmot. And you left her behind. Your manager. Your lover. Your friend. She's hurting, man, and you're not here.

Brent most often thought about Ossirian, most often thought *at* him, as though interviewing or questioning him, when looking through the notebook. He knew what Ossirian's voice sounded like, of course. Anyone with a keen interest in the art world did. That Wisconsin twang wrapped around a philosophical, ephemeral mindset. He was an enigma. The lovers he'd left behind him could fill a good-sized cocktail party in Manhattan. Some wags suggested that, as Genghis Khan had in Asia, Ossirian had indelibly subverted the gene pool of the art set with his relationships. Upwards of forty percent of any art-scene gathering, someone else (he thought it was Toefler, which he found unbearably droll in light of his earlier enlightenment) had theorized, was made up of Ossirian's present or former lovers. The other sixty percent were merely on the waiting list.

No one had ever been quite the star Ossirian had become. Two parts Mick Jagger, two parts Pablo Picasso, equal parts Aristotle and Lenny Bruce, Ossirian had been unique. No other artist had defied, enraged, and seduced critics as he had. No other artist had ever dominated without being domineering. He was reported to have been unfailingly kind, in turn sweet and spoiled, and utterly disconnected from the world. One critic had called him the first painter-mystic. An artist so ephemeral as to be something of a phantom, a will-o-the-wisp with a brush. An upstart emperor whose gravity had drawn all nearby into his orbit.

"Ossirian," one socialite had said, "is the only person on the face of this Earth that has slept his way across continents, indulged in every vice and virtue,

ensnared and released every willing participant to cross his path... and to have made an enemy of none of them. The closest thing to an enemy Christoph Ossirian has is Hans Toefler, a man who reviles Ossirian's behavior while simultaneously extolling the virtues of his work."

So many people, yet no enemies. For the most popular and important painter living, that had been almost more impressive a feat than the paintings themselves. He sat, pensive, staring out of the window, not seeing the landscape beneath them. Before he realized what had happened, he'd fallen asleep.

He woke only when they touched down. They taxied to a jolting stop. Louise came back to them. "Refueling will take thirty minutes. They've requested we not leave the plane. The traffic is heavy, and we're already slotted for takeoff."

"Thank you, Louise," Carolyn said.

"Will you take dinner now, Ms. Delgado?"

"Please," Delgado said. "And martinis, if you would be so kind."

"Right away." Louise went to the small kitchenette behind the panel.

"Do you always drink this heavily?" Metierra asked.

She pursed her lips. "This isn't heavy."

"You don't think the wine with lunch, the... whatever it was in the car, the wine now, and martinis is heavy?" he asked. "That's more than I usually drink in a week."

"It isn't heavy. I can tell."

"How?"

She gave him a blandly amused look. "I'm interested in drinking, but I'm not passionate about it."

He snorted laughter and she gave him a beatific grin.

Louise and her copilot, a slight woman named Helen, went about the various checks and safety lists that getting the plane in the air would entail. Louise served them a three-course meal of Delmonico's best, Lobster Thermador with vegetables, a salad with tangy dressing, and for dessert the baked Alaska, which, as cautioned, hadn't traveled as well as the lobsters. Despite the cracks, it was delicious, and he'd eaten more than his fill. Brent noticed that while Carolyn ate, she ate sparingly. He followed his martini with a glass of champagne. She had three martinis as the mechanics outside thumped and prodded and connected and filled. Finally, after more than an hour, they were cleared. The dinner was taken away, although they had to bottles of champagne on ice as well as a pitcher of martinis.

Brent's head spun as the plane tilted aloft. Once leveling out, Carolyn finished her martini.

"I'm going to go to bed now," she said.

"Oh," Brent said. "Okay. I'll... I'll be out here, I suppose. Could I get a blanket, do you think?"

"Come along, dear boy," she said, and held out a hand.

Unsure, he took it and rose. "Uh-"

"Hush now," she commanded him.

He followed, silent. They made their way to the rear of the plane, through the anachronistic door to where a full bedroom awaited, complete with a king-sized bed and dressers. She looked him up and down, calculating. "There are night things in those drawers, if you feel shy," she pointed.

He swallowed as she went to the other dresser and began to remove filmy, dark things; a negligée, other things he didn't recognize.

She excused herself and entered the spacious bathroom, complete with a double shower, which occupied the very back of the plane. He went to the drawers she had indicated and found a pair of flannel pants and a shirt. He shook them out. They seemed newish, but not wrapper-new. He quickly changed, after pulling the curtain closed, sealing the bedroom away from the main cabin. He shucked his clothing quickly, feeling the dislocation of a dream in which the oddest behavior seemed perfectly natural to everyone else except the dreamer. He folded his clothes, more for lack of anything constructive to do than out of a sense of neatness. Soon enough the bathroom door opened and Carolyn Delgado entered the bedchamber.

The negligée was filmy, as was the wrap, but layered together they gave the appearance of revelation without the exposure of it. The materials hinted at her body rather than displayed it, and he found himself quite breathless. After a moment, he realized she was modeling for him.

"You're beautiful, of course," he breathed. "I'd suspected, but it's gratifying to have a theory proven."

She blushed a little. "You're very good for my ego, you know. I thought you might be."

He didn't know what to say. She moved away from the door of the bathroom. "If you need it," she said, gesturing. He gave her a half-bow and slid by her. She had just barely edged out of the way. Their bodies almost brushed, and he caught a tendril of her perfume as he slipped by. It caressed his brain like a fingertip running over the surface of his mind. He realized he was almost unbearably turned on. She gave him a smile, cat-full-of-canary, and he closed the door gently.

He leaned against the sink, fighting waves of dizziness that had nothing to do with alcohol. He was awash with emotions he couldn't immediately name, and puzzled more than excited, and he was plenty excited. He'd never considered the possibility of taking Carolyn Delgado to bed. It had simply never occurred to him. Certainly she was beautiful; she consistently topped the lists of best-dressed women in the fashion world. She was emulated and imitated, and could set trends by simply lunching in a particular outfit. She had somehow moved from society bird to important art dealer in the span of twenty years that allowed her to command legions of sycophants and imitators.

And she was coming on to *him*.

At least, he thought, I think she is. It's possible. Isn't it?

She's twice your age, he thought.

So what? he argued. She's amazing. Timeless. Sensual and seductive and impossible to read.

She was Ossirian's lover for thirty years, he thought.

Ossirian's dead, he growled in his mind. And the last two years, he'd distanced himself from her. He'd sunk deeper into his holy trance or whatever it was. All he did was paint and sleep. He sent everyone away and produced painting after painting. She marketed them, that's all. He shut himself away in his studio, and died making a grocery run.

He ran the water, splashed some on his face, and smoothed his hair back. Did he *want* to sleep with Carolyn Delgado?

"Are you insane?" he muttered aloud. "Who *doesn't*?"

He shook himself. This wasn't an argument he could win, nor was it one he should have out loud, he supposed. He availed himself of the toilet, took a last look in the mirror at himself, washed his hands, smoothed his hair back again, and shut the water off. He took a deep breath and opened the door of the lavish (for a plane, certainly) bathroom.

She was reclined on the bed, half-curved like a cat or a courtesan, watching him.

He cleared his throat self-consciously.

"Come," she said. "Please would you join me?"

He nodded. She gestured to the light switch, and he flicked it off. The overhead lights dimmed, and only the underlighting of the plane's side panels lit the room. They flickered, flickered, and he realized it resembled candlelight. He slid into the bed next to her.

She put her face up and pulled his down and they kissed. It was a simple kiss, but full of promise. Had he more experience, he would have realized what it was, but he was simply unprepared for a language he'd never studied.

He broke the kiss first. "Ms. Delgado—"

"Carolyn, please," she murmured. "We're no longer in public, nor are we strangers any longer. In this room, this bedroom, we are Carolyn and Brent."

"Carolyn," he amended. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm supposed to— I mean, I don't know what you want from me."

She gave him that catlike smile again. "What is it you think I want from you?"

"I'm not coy," he assured her. "If I knew, I wouldn't ask."

"I don't like to sleep alone," she said. "I never sleep alone if I can help it."

"Why not?"

"There isn't anything worse than waking up in the dark, alone. We all die alone, you know. There's a moment when we wake, in darkness, and we are at last alone. I wouldn't have that, not even a pale reflection of it, not while I'm still living. If I wake in the night and I can hear someone, feel someone, touch someone next to me, I know that I'm alive still, and that I am not dead. That I have more still to do, more life to live."

He stared at her, a lump in his throat. "I—I don't know what to say to that."

"There isn't anything to say," she said. "You cannot fight the weather. Why bother?"

"You can't fight it, but you can buy an umbrella to use against the storm."

“Sometimes,” she said, “in fact at least one time, the world sends a storm so large that an umbrella is simply futile. At the end, I wouldn’t waste time fighting a fight I cannot win. Better instead to accept it, to enjoy all the moments until it happens, and be at ease when it comes.”

“Resigned to losing the fight? How can you think that way?”

“Because unlike you, dear boy, I have had years of fighting. When fighting seemed the only way, death appears as an enemy. Once you understand that there is grace in knowing when you’ve lost, death becomes instead an old friend, not an enemy. A balm instead of a tincture.”

“I see,” he said, and she could see that he did not.

“Until then, I will never sleep alone. It’s better to wake in darkness beside an enemy than not know when one has finally slipped into the unknown. When it comes my time, I will know for certain, for I shall be alone.”

He couldn’t think of a thing to say to that, so he didn’t. Instead he curled up next to her and when she turned her face up, he kissed her lips. She moaned against him, and pressed closer, and as the plane ascended into the heavens, she drew him down into her embrace.

Afterward

This was a strange book for me. It's a spiritual sequel to my first foray into literary fiction, *What You Wish For*. That book explored what it meant to be driven to create. I think this book explores the flipside of that coin: what do you have to give up for art? In that book, the main character gave up nothing. In this one, everything. The net result is about the same, I think. Is it possible to have it all? Not and be happy, I don't think.

In the later chapters, Carolyn Delgado quotes Marge Piercy's excellent poem *The Nuisance*. To me, it encapsulates the inconvenience and insistence of love. It reads thusly:

"The Nuisance"

by Marge Piercy

Circles on the Water. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc, 1982.

I am an inconvenient woman.
I'd be more useful as a pencil sharpener or a cash register.
I do not love you the way I love Mother Jones or the surf
Coming in
Or my pussycats or a good piece of steak.

I love the sun prickly on the black stubble of your cheek.
I love you wandering floppy making scarecrows of despair.
I love you when you are discussing changes in the class structure
And it jams my ears and burns in the tips of my fingers.

I am an inconvenient woman.
You might trade me in on a sheepdog or a llama.
You might trade me in for a yak.
They are faithful and demand only straw.
They make good overcoats.
They never call you up on the telephone.

I love you with my arms and my legs
And my brains and my cunt and my unseemly history.
I want to tell you about when I was ten and it thundered.
I want you to kiss the crosshatched remains of my burn.
I want to read you poems about drowning myself
Laid like eggs without shells at fifteen under Shelly's wings.
I want you to read my old loverletters.

I want you to want me
As directly and simply and variously
As a cup of hot coffee.
I want to, to have to, to miss what can't have room to happen.
I carry my love for you
Around with me like teeth
And I am starving.

Everything you need to know about love can be found in those lines. The desperation, the passion, the sometimes-impossible juxtaposition of happiness and love.

I disagree with Carolyn Delgado, who said that love cannot reason. I think love can be reasonable. I think love is simple, really. Love is that peculiar state of being wherein someone else's happiness means more to you than your own. If that's not reasonable, I don't know what might be

Each of the four sections, *Sfumato*, *Chiaroscuro*, *Cangiante*, and *Unione*, are the four main styles of painting developed by the Renaissance masters. I do not believe it is an accident that smoke, contrast, change, and union are also states of human existence. After all, that is what their work represents. What they tried to convey. It's a message I've contemplated on numerous occasions while writing this book. As a writer, I don't consider myself an artist. Like Ossirian, I think that there is a delineator between a workman and a master, and well there should be. I'm a writer; he a painter. It's what we do. How well we do it is a different matter entirely.

You'll find all of the references in this book about painters and sculptors and their work to be completely accurate. History is far too interesting to make up any of it. Stanislov Szukalski, by the way, is exactly as I have described, including his oddly famous obscurity. His sculptures are... distinct, and quite worth your time.

There were too many sources to count used in the researching and writing of this book. Suffice to say, any biography and *every* Renaissance- focused art history class in college will give you what you need to know: the Renaissance painters invented it as they went, and they were, despite their personalities and because of their tireless practice and pursuit of excellent, singular artists and masters. What we have today in art we built on their bones. Whether we surpass them is immaterial; they know what they did, and so do we.

As always, thank you for giving my worlds a try.

Aaron S Gallagher

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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