

ONE



Monsieur Marcel Torneau's Art Studio First of March, 1909

I never set out to pose nude. I didn't, honestly. But when the opportunity arose, I took it. Many would say I'm impetuous, some would say it would be the death of me, in fact, it almost was. But I have no regrets. Life is worth nothing if you don't grab it by both hands.

I sat with the other artists on that fateful morning in Monsieur Torneau's tiny studio in the French village of Trouville waiting for Bernadette, our usual model, to arrive. Some tinkered with their charcoals and pencils, others adjusted their easels. A few of the artists stared at the stage as if the model would magically appear if they looked hard enough. Monsieur bustled around in his canvas smock moving the artist chair into the light, and plumping the bolsters. The studio smelled of turpentine, oil paints and charcoal, and there was no sweeter perfume in the world to me than that.

One of the artists called Etienne yawned, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes.

“Hung over, old fellow?” Bertram whispered to him. “Is fair Bernadette in the same state?”

Etienne grunted a warning but did not open his eyes.

“Poor Etienne,” I whispered. “He looks unwell, Bertram. Let him be.”

Bertram reached for his pencil, sharpened it with his knife, and began to sketch a cartoon of Etienne. “It’s hard to feel sorry for a chap who has inflicted illness upon himself, and caused the sad demise of our model, once again.” He added devil’s horns to the line drawing and then nudged Etienne’s boot with his own. Etienne cracked open one bloodshot eye and then closed it. “He lacks the artist’s discipline but possesses all of his foibles.”

“We all have our faults, Bertie.” I knew I shouldn’t side with Etienne, he was such a rascalion.

“If he had half your discipline, my darling Vicky, he would be lucky,” Bertram said.

I smiled and leaned forward to begin a sketch of Etienne, this one with angel’s wings. Bertram saw what I was doing, grinned and shook his head.

I met Bertram and Etienne several months ago when I was drawing my best friend, Lily, in the village square. They plunked down at our table as if we knew them and watched me as I worked. I was about to tell them to keep to themselves, when Bertram blurted out: “You’re very good.” But then he spoilt it by adding: “For a girl.” I found out they were art students, and I begged them to introduce me to Monsieur Torneau. Monsieur was a rare person in the world of art. He didn’t care if the artist was male or female; he let the work speak.

All of the other artists at the studio were male, and none of them gave me a thought apart from the occasional curious glance. I did not blame them. Most females painted subjects that did not matter.

But the artists were wrong about me; I was not like other girls, artists or otherwise. I didn't fill my head with airy nothings or paint sentimental watercolors of kittens and flowers; I wanted so much more. I wanted to be considered among the best artists in the world. I wanted critics to laud my work, but most of all, I wanted to express myself through my art as I fancied, and not be told what or whom I could draw or paint.

No one at my boarding school, Madame Edith's Finishing School for Girls, knew I attended classes at the studio, not the head mistress or any of my fellow students, apart from Lily who helped me sneak away. If they knew, it would be hell's delight because Monsieur Torneau's classes were not the kind of classes females should frequent. In Monsieur Torneau's class we drew from the undraped figure—the nude. No woman of good breeding would ever do such a thing, which was another reason why female artists were not taken seriously. Sometimes women could draw from nude statues without fear of scandal. The South Kensington Museum in London held drawing classes for women, but the instructors covered the male statues' bits with tin fig leaves. Apparently, gazing at a statue's male anatomy was equivalent to staring into the sun.

Monsieur Torneau glanced at his pocket watch and sighed. "D'accord. I think that Mademoiselle Bernadette will not be with us today." He leveled a look at Etienne, who cradled his head in his hands. "So. We say goodbye for the day or we have a student pose." Monsieur raised his eyebrows, his gaze flitted over the artists briefly and then lit on Bertram.

“I’m not doing it again,” Bertram raised his voice over the artist’s calls of encouragement. “Once was enough.”

“Who wants to draw your scrawny carcass again anyway,” came a voice from the back of the room.

“I nominate Etienne,” Bertram went on. “He’s the cause of all this grief.” He stood up, grinning, and dragged Etienne to his feet by the shoulder of his jacket. Several students shouted out in agreement. Etienne took this all in good nature for about ten seconds. Bertram was pulling at the buttons of his jacket when Etienne slapped his hand over his mouth, turned a very sickly shade of yellow, and ran for the back door that led to the outdoor privy. Sounds of retching echoed through the room.

“Can you not find a model who resists Etienne’s charms, Monsieur?” one of the artists asked. “This is the second time Bernadette has failed to show after a night out with him.”

“I’m sick to the back teeth of drawing the blokes,” Bertram added. “Hell’s bells, I can draw my own todger at home. We need to draw women, Monsieur.”

I felt the gaze of several of the artists fall upon me.

“I will try, but it is difficult to find women who are willing. Or one whose father will let her.” He looked over the group again and sighed. “If no one will volunteer then I shall bid you all farewell. A demain.”

“Why does she not pose?” said Pierre, a burly artist from Paris, who had pointedly ignored me from the day I walked into the studio. “Everyone here has had a turn, why not her?”

I twisted in my seat and scowled at him. “My name is Vicky!”

Pierre shrugged. "I only learn names of people who matter, Vicky."

"Don't be an ass, Pierre," Bertram said. "She's just a girl."

There it was again: I was just a girl.

"Pardonez moi!" Pierre replied. "I thought she was an artist. She pretends to be."

Before I knew what was what the words burbled out: "I'll do it!"

Pierre looked taken aback for a moment, but then he bowed slightly. "Well then, mademoiselle." Pierre sat back down in his chair and began to set up his easel.

Monsieur Torneau's whiskered face registered surprise.

"I didn't mean you, Vicky," Bertram said.

"The other artists here have modeled, so why shouldn't I do my bit?" I said.

He took me by the elbow and led me off to the corner. He leaned in close. "It's different for women," he whispered.

"Different for women! What rot."

"Vicky, female models have more to lose than male ones. No one cares if a bloke gets his kit off."

"If I'm going to be a student here then I have to be willing to do everything that they do. There can't be two sets of rules, one for them and one for me, the only girl in the class. How will I earn their respect if I don't pose?" I threw a glance over my shoulder at the students watching us. Pierre sat with his arms folded, sneering.

"Are you going to try to tell me that you care what Pierre thinks? That great buffoon? The only one who you should care about is Monsieur Torneau, and he thinks

the sun shines out your arse. Take my advice, let your fabulous work speak for you, and forget about what everyone else says or thinks.”

“I’m doing it.” I jerked my arm out of Bertram’s grasp and marched to the front of the room. Monsieur came forward and helped me up on the dais. He threw open the creaky blue shutters to let in as much light as the gloomy day would allow.

I turned my back, and let my breath out. How to begin? I had no idea. When Bertram had disrobed to model, he made it funny, pretending to be a fan dancer at the Folies Bergère, taking each item of clothing off and throwing it to us, eyes rolling comically while we whooped and hollered.

I decided to do the opposite, to act as if disrobing in front of a group of men was just a larkabout. I started to undo my blouse, but my hands shook and my fingers slipped off the buttons. I swallowed, squeezed my hands into fists and tried again. No one spoke a word as I undressed, but I could hear the usual sounds of artists readying their easels--the rustling of paper and the scrape of pencils against knives. I slid my skirt and petticoats off, put them neatly to one side, turned around and sat down on the chair. No one leered at me, no one gaped. Instead, the artists looked at me frankly, and then bent to their work. Bertram remained in the corner with his hands in his pockets. I tilted my head toward his easel. He hesitated for a moment, as if he wanted to say something. But then he shrugged, went back to his work place and began to draw.

I felt my shoulders relaxing, and pride building inside me. I felt like Queen Boadicea taking on the Romans. I leaned forward, propped my chin in my hand, and stared out at the boys.

I’m one of you now.

When the class was over, several of the students asked me to join them at the cafe, a place they all went after class to argue about art. I had to say no--I was late enough as it was--but I held the invitation close, like a treat I would take out later and savor.

I walked quickly through the village and then broke into a run when I reached the pathway that led to an ancient chestnut tree, my meeting place with Lily, who always waited with my school uniform. I was halfway there when I saw her step out onto the path. Her face was white as milk and she held my uniform bundled against her chest.

“What’s happened, Lily? Are you ill?”

She clutched the clothing tighter. “Oh, Vicky. Tell me it isn’t true!”

“True? What are you talking about?”

Lily chewed her lip and shifted from one foot to the other. Her complexion began to change from pale to bright pink. Her curly blonde hair had escaped its combs and it formed a wild halo over her head.

“Give over, Lily, you’re frightening me.”

“Did you really take your clothes off in front of men?” she blurted out.

“Pardon?” I blinked, dumbfounded.

“It’s all over school,” Lily went on, breathless. “Mildred Halfpenny said she saw you undressed, sitting in front of crowd of men. She must have heard us talking about the art studio and followed you. You know what an eavesdropper she is.”

Mildred Halfpenny. Quelle surprise. Mildred had been jealous of me for yonks. She hated that I was Lily’s best friend; the idiot thought she had more claims on her because their families summered together in Germany once. And she thought she was better than me because my father had a plumbing fittings and fixtures holding and her

father owned a lingerie company. As if knickers and petticoats put her higher in the social standing than toilets and wash hand basins. I called her the Royal Princess of Underpants once and her face turned so purple with rage that I thought she was going to choke.

How could Mildred have seen me? The window by the model's dais looked over the river. She must have tip-toed round where no one ought to go and peered in the window. Who knew that clumsy oaf could be so nimble?

"Is it true?" She stepped forward, her face pleading.

"Our model didn't show so I volunteered." I took my uniform from her and went behind the tree to change.

"You volunteered?" Lily's voice was climbing higher. "Volunteered?"

"It's not as if I make a habit out of it, Lily," I called out. "It was just the once, for heaven's sake. All the other students modeled and it was my turn. I don't know why everyone has to make a dog and pony show over it. If Mildred's told then she's told. I'll have to brazen it out." I buttoned my blouse and stepped back on the path. "Madame Frou Frou will devise some sort of punishment for me and then it will be over."

"Are you mad, Vicky? Do you have an idea how horrid this is? Brazening out is not going to work." Lily paused for a moment and then went on, her face grave.

"Madame has already telephoned your father."

"My...father?" I whispered. The shock of it made my cheeks tingle and my limbs go weak.

Not for the first time I thought about how much I hated the telephone.

Chapter Two

Cunard Steamship Line, Cherbourg, France, Third of March 1909

I stood on the deck of the steamship and looked out at the seaside town of Cherbourg. Gray clouds scudded overhead and a brisk wind whisked the sea into foamy waves. The damp air seeped into my bones. I shivered and wrapped my arms about myself. The weather had chased the rest of the passengers below long ago, but Cherbourg was my final glimpse of France and I was loathe to look away.

The steamship's vast engines rumbled to life, the sailors cast off the lines, and the boat began to make its way across the Channel toward England. Toward home.

The immediate punishment for posing nude was bearable. I was expelled from Madame Edith's Finishing School for Girls--good riddance to bad rubbish. No more marching about with books on my head to perfect my posture. No more elocution lessons hammering home the proper diction of words as though one's fate in life depended upon it. No more listening to inane conversations about how the hockey pitch was flooded or what sort of pudding would be served at Sunday lunch--usually the same old jam roly poly, so I don't know why the girls yammered on about it. My expulsion would have been welcome if it hadn't meant saying goodbye to Monsieur's art studio forever. I had not had a chance to say farewell, not even by letter. When I went to ask Lily to take a note to the studio, she looked at me with red-rimmed, tear-filled eyes, and I put the note back in my pocket. Lily was in trouble enough for helping me, I did not want to add to her burden.

Yes, the immediate punishment was bearable; the unknown punishment was the one I feared the most.