

Chapter One

Paris

Spring of 1918 is the first time I am without her. I listen for her amidst the sounds of explosions and the police whistles and the infernal beat of their drums, but I cannot hear her. When the bombing starts again, I leave my apartment and go onto the streets and stand silently, looking at the black sky; passing men try to grab at my arms, urging me to the safety of the métro station, but I shake them off. She will find me here, I am certain of it.

But she does not come, and I do not die.

Leonie, I say aloud and watch how her name burns white heat into the night and then disappears. *It is better this way*. This is what she said to me before she left me alone, it is better. You don't get to say what is best for me, I'd said in a way that made her pale. She put the flat of her hand against her stomach, closing her eyes against me and instantly I wanted to pull her back. How my skin crawled against being shut out, it became like pins stuck into my flesh and I dropped to my knees, desperate to do anything to make her open her eyes again, to see me. I crawled to her across the length of blank white canvas, dragging my skirt through paint, smearing it in a way I would later look at and think rather beautiful. I put my arms around her waist and clung to her, burying my face against her stomach and speaking muffled words against her, until she put her hands on my shoulders and shoved against me, crying *stop it* again and again until I obeyed.

Don't you see, she had said and her voice shook in a way that sent shame curling through me; I grew weak from it. This is what you do, Sophie, she said, you are too much.

I felt her unfair and said so, but she looked at me with her green eyes and said, You don't really care about me. This is the only thing you love, and she gestured at the enormous canvas stretched across my floor.

That's a lie, I had said but my mouth felt strange, the words oddly formed. She looked so sad, as if she had heard what I'd really meant. Don't leave me, I whispered and she turned her head, so that she no longer saw me. I felt it, a dagger, doing its best to split me in two. You promised you'd never leave, I said, and she closed her eyes. I saw that she, too, was split apart. I became dizzy then, and gripped the edge of the table. My jaw ached where I clenched it. What right had she to be sad?

Just go, I had said in a low voice. If you're going to go, *go*.

Sophie, she said and hesitated, and when I wouldn't look at her she made a sound that sounded like how pain felt, and then the door opened. I waited as long as I could; it was not longer than ten seconds. She'd gone, leaving the door open, and I went quickly down the stairs, from the fifth floor to the main and there she was, stopped just inside the entrance.

She heard my steps because she wiped quickly at her cheeks and straightened her shoulders. I'm not your mother, she said in a low voice and I began to tremble.

No, I said, you're worse because you've chosen this.

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When I went back into my apartment, the part of me that had gone wrong felt heavier still. It was too silent, too empty. I put my hands on my hips and looked at the paint I'd tracked across the canvas. It looked like pain, smudged as it was; I remembered that sound she'd made, how it sounded like it, too. And I thought, I can make something else rather beautiful out of this, and so I did.

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I am jolted from my work by a banging on the door. The clamorous pounding is unrelenting and I put my hands against my head—for I feel it there now, the pounding—and shake it back and forth. Stop! I yell and kick at a metal canister, bright cerulean paint splattering against the wooden parquet. I stare at it, the way the viscous liquid appears clotted, like blue blood. The banging does not cease; it rattles the door, the pictures hanging on the wall clatter against the plaster. It's been said the blood inside of our bodies is blue, that it only turns red when exposed to oxygen, and so I pull the sleeve of my stained shirt up and look at the veins traveling up my wrist. Translucent, they are, but—yes—blue. I think they're just the same color and my heart beats quickly.

When finally I pull the door open, Louis stops short, staring at how the back of my hand is covered in blue paint, dripping from my fingertips. He's dressed in an officer's overcoat, navy blue broadcloth with gold buttons, trimmed in red. His dark hair is covered by a kepi hat. But a low pulse thrums in my throat, I feel as though I might float, and cling to the door knob.

Dare I ask? he says, nodding to the paint.

The exact color as my veins, I say and try to sound lighthearted, but the words sink around us, turning morbid and rock-like. He pushes past me, looking grim. Is it as bad as all that? I ask.

He stops in front of the canvas, eyeing how it's staked to the floor. This is very good, he says. Will it be part of the show?

The canvas reaches six feet high and four feet wide. I stand back from it and consider the work, a half-formed woman dressed in a coat of many colors. She has no face, nor hair; I have not yet decided whom she will be.

It won't be done for some time, I say.

Work quickly, he says, I'd like to fit it in.

I narrow my eyes at him, how he taps his hat against his palm, the look of discomfort he wears, how he avoids my eyes.

Why have you come here?

He runs his hand over his mustache, clears his throat. Clutches his hat in both hands.

What is it, Louis? The pulse in my head grows stronger, it aches just above my left eye; I put a finger to it and press. Weeks have passed since I last saw Leonie; we have never gone so long without speaking. Is it Leonie? I ask.

In a way, he says, uncomfortably, yes.

I look at the empty-faced woman laying on my floor; empty, only because I have not yet painted her into it, her high, broad cheekbones, her gently recessed chin. Her color-of-the-sea eyes spaced distantly apart. I grow cold, looking at it.

She's dead, isn't she?

What? Louis says. No, for god's sake, no.

For a moment the terror remains so tight around my throat that I cannot quite catch a breath. Then, what is it? I ask.

You were, Louis coughs gently. Excuse me. You were—how do I say—*seen*.

Seen?

Yes, he says, *seen*.

Stop speaking in italics, I say, what does that mean?

Sophie, Louis finally looks directly at me and my bluster is quite knocked away. I notice, finally, how miserable he appears; his coat has been misbuttoned, he has run his hands through

his dark hair so it flops down over his forehead. I notice a frayed blue thread at his wrist and a loose gold button. If I were any other woman I would snip the thread, I would reattach the button.

But I am not anyone else.

I sit with a thump upon the parquet. Seen, he says, and I think of Leonie and I in the foyer of the apartment building, weeks before she'd left, the heavy door resting against her back. She held it open. Such a strong backside, I'd teased her, and rested my cheek against her coarse brown hair and breathed in her unique smell of rose and spice. I remember now how she'd said *we'll be seen*, but I brushed it aside for I'd had on the men's clothing I'd taken to wearing more and more often, my hair hidden beneath a cap. If anyone sees us, I'd said, they'll think me a man.

If you were here, I think, I would tell you I love you.

What does this mean, I say aloud.

For a long time, Louis is silent. He looks at the canvas on the floor, at the puddle of congealing cerulean paint. I think he must see her there too, because he too wears a look of pain. The sun falls across the floor, stretching itself gracefully across the parquet. I cannot resist the trick of light, it has long been known to me that light illuminates the darkness enabling us to see our true selves and so I welcome the darkness, knowing it brings me closer to God.

They will not cancel the show, he says and I look away from the sunlight.

Was that an option? I ask in surprise.

You don't understand, do you? He says and I see suddenly how angry he is with me. With your...your *recklessness* you have nearly ruined both of us, he spits. Do you have any idea how much money I have invested in you, in this exhibition?

I do! I flare hotly. You never let an opportunity pass without telling me.

I promised them the rumors are unsubstantiated, that they are nothing more than gossip created by a jealous rival. He speaks in a low voice and does not take his eyes from me. I put my hands in my lap, so he does not see how they tremble.

And they believed you?

He shoves his hands into the deep pockets of his overcoat and turns away, crossing to the windows along the wall, looking out over Paris. I feel again that thing within me break apart.

There's no one like you, he says, still looking out the window. No other woman artist is doing the kind of work you are.

I know-! I start to say and he holds up a hand *silence*, he seems to say.

Henri's latest...he blows air through his lips. Pfft. Derivative of yours. Wassily, *derivative*. Pablo, *derivative*.

Yes, yes, I say, impatient. Yes. I cannot help but smile, a gleam of cold triumph. Yes, I think and the spirit stirs within me, I am the one.

Louis whirls to me. You must understand, he says, his voice shaking with anger, how much you have to lose! You could be the greatest artist in the entire world, Sophie. Man *or* woman. But you...you think you are above societal expectation. You are throwing it all away for...

Do not say her name, I cry and leap to my feet. Heat floods through me. You do not get to say her name. You said yourself they will not cancel the show. I am the greatest artist of my generation! You said it yourself. The men, they are mere copycats!

The commissions are pulled, he says.

I pause. Excuse me?

The commissions are pulled. Your patrons are too worried about the rumors. They are going elsewhere. No one will see you. Your work, if this continues, will be relegated. Forgotten.

All of the commissions have been canceled?

He nods. And the money, he says quietly, that will go too. Because nothing more will come in as long as these rumors persist.

And why won't they cancel the exhibition then? I ask, my voice faint.

For a long moment Louis does nothing, says nothing, then he takes his hand from his pocket. He's worn his overcoat this entire time, I just now notice; he hasn't taken it off. He holds something in his hand, his fingers curled around it. He stands as if frozen against the window, and then a cloud passes over the sun because, for just a moment, the light disappears, and I am left cold.

He crosses back to me. Lightly, my teeth begin to chatter. He unfurls his fingers and I see then what lays upon his palm. I can no longer hide how I shake, nor the dread that has been coiled inside, now unfurling and floating unfettered through my body.

I told them, he says, that the rumors are false because we are engaged. I said we are to be married.

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In the place of my birth, there are many fields of lavender. It was here that I was born into color, amidst the disruption between the arc of pure blue sky, the conical cypress trees stretching their greenery aloft, the proud mounded lavender sitting like Craquelin atop choux. I often dream of this place, of the violence of purple that spreads itself across the land. In my dreams I walk through the valleys, reaching my arm toward the flowers and letting the buds brush across my palm, and when I wake I cup my hand to my nose, certain I will smell it there.

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Take it away, I say to Louis, turning my face from the diamond ring nestled in his palm. I cannot marry you. I will not!

But he doesn't take it back, and so I gasp and turn from him.

It's the only way, he says behind me. If you have any thought to your career—mine be damned! But if you think to save yourself, this is the only way.

How can you suggest such a thing? I say the words coldly, wrapping my arms around my waist. The paint has dried and tugs painfully against my skin. I could never marry you.

Careful, he says, equally as cold, say too much more and I'll rescind my overly generous offer and let you burn.

You wouldn't, I say, but he smiles. They'll...they'll forget the rumors, I say. They'll die away. Gossip always does. Tomorrow it will be yesterday's news. The commissions will come back.

He looks at me in a way that makes me shudder. Look at you, he says, and I become very still, holding myself against the assault. You dress like a man most of the time, he says. You walk about in long pants and a top hat. You swing a cane and you hold a pipe to your mouth. You flaunt this part of yourself; you laugh in the face of your patrons. They accept a bit of eccentricity, admire it even! They expect it in an artist such as you. But. Their goodwill and wallets will only extend so far. At the end of the day, they want this little bit of eccentricity to be the most interesting thing about you. What I mean is, you must be boring in every other part of your life.

Boring! I cry; the word grinds against me. I can no more be boring than I can be-

A Sapphist? He says the word flatly and I stop, my face flooding with heat.

Louis, I say, aghast. It is a word I've never affixed to myself, nor to any woman I've known.

He looks down at the diamond in his hand. He says, Did I get that wrong?

Yes, how wrong he has gotten it all, I think. Could I turn and see her behind me? I am certain I can sense her there. But things have a way of vanishing when we open our eyes, I am certain.

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He tells me to change before we leave the studio, pushing me to the armoire in the corner. I let him, my body loose and pliable and out of the corner of my eye I look at the faceless woman on my floor. He pulls the shirt from my head, and my flesh tightens and pricks from the incursion of cool air. The tail of a memory hovers just below the surface and I shake with the effort of not remembering.

Louis' fingers rest on my bare skin and I close my eyes. I imagine another hand, one with skinny fingers and delicate bones. Then he pulls from the armoire a long-waisted crepe dress in stone blue. Not that one, I say softly; I cannot seem to take my eyes from it. He pays me no mind and pulls the dress over my head. The ring on my finger feels dense, my arm weighted down. Down, down, my body is pulled to the floor. How heavy disloyalty feels.

He pushes me in front of the only mirror in the place, a small rectangle above an upright sink. My face, a distorted grimace in the glass, his behind. He fingers my short, blonde hair.

So light, he says, dissatisfied. So short. Whatever made you cut it?

I touch the ends. It got in the way while painting, I say. But I don't tell him how having such long hair made me feel conspicuous, too overtly feminine. I don't tell him how, in a fit of sadness when Leonie left, I stood in this very spot and took a pair of dull shears to it, flinching

with every cut as if I could feel it, and how after I stood amidst a pile of long, nearly white hairs and felt lighter, taller, and more like myself.

He puts a brown cloche hat over my head, hiding the severity of the cut. I put my hands against the fabric of the dress. I feel so different from myself, I am certain if I were to look in the mirror it would not be my face that stared back from it. But I do look, I dare to! I think: See? I can be brave. Take note of what reflects back at me, a sort of inventory: here are my own brown eyes, so dark they appear black; here is my own pale skin, here is my own small, pointed nose, here are my own arched dark-winged brows, so incongruous to the lightness of my hair. Dressed in Leonie's clothes I do not look like myself, but somehow it comforts me, that I am costumed such. Because it is a costume, I may be able to do what Louis requires of me.

But here is another piece of me rising to the surface; it bubbles and froths within me. Insistently it says, if you do this, she will never come back, she will not understand it is a lie. I remain torn, staring into the eyes of the woman in the glass, who is at once me and not me; it is as if she inhabits half of me. The part that remains reaches for her through the glass. *Tell me what to do*, the words whisper silently through me but though I strain to hear she says nothing back.

Louis has grown impatient; he checks his watch again and then again, though the minute hand has scarcely had a chance to move. We must go quickly now, he says and crosses the parquet floor of my studio with long strides, his wool overcoat flaps around his black leather boots.

Outside, it is sunny, but the wind is sharp and chills my skin. The light crepe jacket does nothing to protect against it. The early spring light lashes itself against the stones and I stumble, the heel of Leonie's shoe caught between cobblestones. I cry out, and my heel comes easily out of its shoe, for the shoe is too big. Louis kneels; he takes my foot in his hand. The care he takes

softens me to him, and I rest my hand upon his shoulder. He turns his face up to mine and we're caught here, but I am soon distracted by a soft flapping sound, a whoosh, and I look up and take my hand from him.

The French flag hangs above Town Hall on Rue de Lobeau. It twists and flicks itself against the breeze. Inside my gloves, my fingers are stiff. The street is empty and I think for a moment of commenting on it, of how alone we are. But I think of how my voice will sound, loud against the stone buildings, and I say nothing. Last night I went again onto the street and raised my head to the sky, to the invisibility of the stars, hidden thusly by smoke and clouds. Distantly came the bleat of a lone police whistle, the tattoo of drums through the dark. Go back, it beat. I held my breath and waited for the explosion, but nothing came, and I knew it was just the policeman alone on the street.

It feels impossible that I should go on, that I should push this ring forward and proclaim to Paris that I am to marry Louis. Panic wells within me because this is what she'd said would happen; long ago, when we were girls together. You'll marry him, she said with a sly smile and rested her head upon my shoulder; You'll marry him and forget all about me. *Never!* I want to say to her. *I can never forget you.* But we left the studio too quickly, there hadn't been time to send a note to explain, and anyway, I don't know where she is, and it all sends a churn of emotion through me so wild that it stops my breath. I see so clearly before me the path that has been laid out; it fills my mouth with a sharp acidity, the shame of it crumbles in my mouth.

And as I walk, I think of Judas.