

## An Ugly Lie

### 1.

*1787, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, Provence*

By the afternoon, the classroom became a coffin. These insufferable girls – straight-backed like sunflowers – soaked up the warmth of each other’s whispers, while I wilted, sinking deeper into my seat, buried alive.

At the front, Mademoiselle cleared her throat and launched into the final passage for the literature lesson. The others, faces reverent with a false thirst for knowledge, turned to her as if she were the sun.

I pushed the window beside me open, the glass cool against my dirt-stained fingerpads. I should have scrubbed them for longer this morning after planting the crocuses, but what a relief Maman hadn’t noticed: there were only so many tongue lashings I could take in one day before I wanted to stab something.

A faint breeze carried the fragrance of *Daphne odora* – if I remembered the scientific name correctly. In the yard below, Jean-Jacques swung his scythe through the grass, *swish-swish-swish*, his back bent like an old man though he was only twenty-something and well-muscled. He needed a longer handle for that instrument.

‘Mademoiselle Cosvèr! Close that window and answer the question.’

Damnation! There was no relief in having a young lay teacher when she was as strict as the old nuns. I tugged down the sleeves of my dress, the blue wool rough against my skin.

‘Pardon, Mademoiselle.’ I yanked the window shut, cutting off the pleasure.

Mademoiselle tap-tapped the onyx brooch pinning her lace fichu. ‘What the author is suggesting in the passage I just read, is that successful deception requires effort and skill. Merely lying is not enough; one must lie effectively to achieve the desired outcome. What else is de Laclos implying, Frédérique?’ She snapped *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* shut, waving the book at me like a fencer brandishing a rapier.

‘To lie well, you must lie honestly.’

A slow release of breath at the desk across the aisle, as intimate to me as my own hand – Marie playing the perfect queen bee. I twisted my foot around one leg of my chair, pressing my ankle against the wood until it bit into my skin.

Laughter bounced off the wood-panelled walls, and Mademoiselle scowled at her sunflowers. ‘Don’t laugh, girls. It sounds like a contradiction, but Frédérique is right. You see, the lie must come from the heart and be filled with authentic emotion, or you fool no one.’

Her eyes, the luminescent brown of sultanas in sunlight, bored into me as though pressing home a point. She couldn’t possibly know my Great Lie. I pushed my ankle harder against the wood. Perhaps she expected me to add something.

She let out a sigh that suggested long sufferance. ‘Class dismissed. Please note that Mother Superior has rearranged next week’s schedule, and Sister Emmeline will take you for religion first thing on Monday.’

Groaning inwardly at the assured boredom, I gathered my satchel. I passed the others as they collected in the hallway to gossip, careful to keep myself angled away and silent.

Downstairs, the Ursuline Sisters darted through the stone cloister, heads down, going about their godly business like sparrows, barely distinguishable from each other in their habits.

Considering whether I should pester Cook for hot chocolate before I harvested the last of the persimmons when I got home, I passed through the arched portal onto the convent's gravel entranceway.

'Hey, Fredi,' Lissette teased.

That *tas de merde*. I clenched my teeth hating that my name in her mouth was both pleasant and unpleasant. I would not turn around, would not play into her hands. What I would do, was keep walking and ignore her. How could Marie stand such a bitch for a friend? I bit down until my teeth were in danger of cracking.

'You have the logic of a man in class,' Lissette drawled. 'You're as tall as a man. As serious as a man. Perhaps that is why Mademoiselle likes you.'

A chorus of *Woos!* from her friends.

My stomach fluttered; Mademoiselle liked me?

'Perhaps you *are* a man.' Lissette's voice turned sharp. 'We should lift your skirts and see.'

Something hard hit my back. I stumbled and, catching myself, squared my shoulders against the throb along my spine. It would bruise tomorrow, the colour on my skin blue or perhaps purple like a mulberry stain. At my feet lay a yellowish-green fruit, its mushy flesh cracked and studded with bits of gravel. What a waste of a good Guyot pear. Those girls were fools.

Some darkness within me made me want to hurt Lissette. I glanced over my shoulder. Lissette smirked, eyes bronze as an asp viper's, and leaned toward the others, murmuring something that sent them into stifled snorts of laughter.

And Marie, golden head haloed by sunlight, had her clear brown gaze steady upon me. Surrounded by her snakepit of friends. I dug my thumbnail into my forefinger until it stung. It couldn't have been her who threw the fruit. I could bear anything but that cut.

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Irritatingly serene statues of Mary watched from wall niches as I fled the convent through town – untouched by struggle or doubt. No stabbing taunts lurked behind their backs, no fear gnawed at their ribs.

The butcher lumbered past, a glistening carcass slung over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing. His thick neck disappeared into the stiff leather hood, blood blotching his apron in dark, crusted smears. I skirted around him as he made for the far side of *Place du Tri* – a wedge of open space where three streets met, funnelling the town's business into a tight triangle of trade. The butcher's shop hunched at its narrowest point, its windows fogged with the heat of fresh slaughter.

From the boulangerie along the broadest side of the triangle, Madame Fournier called out a greeting, the dimples in her cheeks deepening in her broad face. Perhaps she expected me to purchase a loaf for dinner, but on Fridays, Cook always baked *pastis de treflas*, so all I had for Madame was a wave.

From the goldsmith's shop next door, little Madame Abraham smiled at me over the heads of two village children as she offered them boiled sweets. Returning the smile, I turned right, descending a street where the terracotta-roofed houses huddled close, their stucco peeling around pastel-painted shutters, windowsills spilling pots of rosemary, ivy and geraniums.

At the town's fringe, rough-hewn cottages and low stone walls grew from the earth as naturally as the weeds between the cobblestones. Through gaps in the willows and poplars lining the Rhône, past tangled tamarisk and wild olive scrub, I snatched glimpses of Avignon across the water – the broken span of the Pont Saint-Bénézet, the looming bulk of the Palais des Papes, the wink of the great golden Virgin atop the cathedral as she caught the sun.

The land opened to fields, separated by the plane tree-lined road home, and here, footsteps followed me. I smiled, recognising the pattern of Marie's gait, the way her left foot fell slightly heavier because she carried her satchel on that side.

When I reached the next tree, the one with my word carved on its backside, she was beside me, her cheeks flushed by the effort of catching up and perhaps, I hoped, a little from shame.

'Fred!' She caught my hand as always, her skin hot on mine. 'I'm sorry they threw the pear at you.'

She meant she was sorry she hadn't come to my defence. She never did. I tipped my head to the sky, coppered by the veil of leaves above us. A single autumn leaf broke away, or perhaps the tree cast it from itself, and it floated, tipping this way and that, to the ground at my feet.

She tugged on my hand, forcing me to look at her, her gaze steady as if to assure me of her constancy. Unable to discern truth from lies, I stamped the fallen leaf into the ground, the small violence soothing.

What embarrassed her was my height, or perhaps my eyes—*blasphemous that blue against such black hair*, a Sister had remarked with a look I took for disgust. Or it was because I'd rather discuss literature than gossip about boys, or preferred growing plants to a ribbon collection. Once, Marie had called me beautiful, said she loved those things about me, but her actions said otherwise. I'd never confronted her with it, and now it burst forth before I could contain it.

'You're ashamed to be my friend.'

Shaking her head, she pulled me close so the heat of her was upon me, my skin flushing with it beneath my dress.

'Stop it. You know that's not true. It's for the illusion.'

*Safer to have only Catholic friends at school*, our mothers had said. *Completes the illusion*. But they didn't stop to think that I was lonely, that I needed a friend at school. I was only meant to disappear.

Her eyes softened, turning to honey, the pupils dilating as she pleaded with me to understand, but all I heard were her excuses.

'If I was discovered, I would never betray you.' I raised my eyebrow, challenging her.

'Nor I you,' she whispered. 'You believe that, don't you?'

I swallowed, wanting to believe, but that wasn't the same. The wind chose that moment to swirl crackling leaves around our ankles, and she laughed at the little whirlwind. Her face glowed with it, her loveliness too much. I swept away from such unbearable pain.

She hurried to keep up. 'Why are you walking so fast?'

'There's only a few hours of light left, and I have to pick the last of the persimmons.'

Did she not understand how her radiance, her untouchable glow, turned every word she spoke into a delicate blade against my skin? How each soft promise fell like a weight on my heart, too fragile to believe yet too tempting to resist? It felt reckless, dangerous, to believe her words.

'Please don't be so morose.' She spread her arms. 'This is the best of all possible worlds right here.'

So now she wanted to quote *Candide* as if it could soften me. 'You're Voltaire's Professor Pangloss. Ever the eternal optimist.'

She ran in front of me and walked backwards, pouting so her lips were a ripe raspberry. The need to put my mouth on hers took away my breath.

'Professor Pangloss is an ugly male tutor.' She fluttered her eyelashes. 'I'd rather be the beautiful and desirable Cunégonde.'

If wanting to be a tragic character was all she took from the book, then I'd wasted the summer reading it to her. When Papa had secured the copy for me, he'd said it contained important insights for the discerning, had said, *Let it be our secret* (since the book was technically banned) and smiled his wonderful Papa smile, the one that said, I understand you. Clearly, Marie was not discerning, though she'd enjoyed its drama well enough.

A meanness made me say, 'Would you really want to be at the mercy of men who would make you their sport?'

She laughed, though there was a hitch in it, as if she couldn't catch her breath.

As if she were afraid.