

## Chapter One

If you asked me how it began, I could truthfully say that the first time, it was an accident. It was about six in the evening, the time when the city churns again on its axis, and though the streets above were full of the sharp wind of another piss-miserable May, the station was stuffy and humid, squalid with discarded tabloids and fast-food wrappings, irritable tourists in garish leisure wear crammed amid the resigned, sallow-faced commuters. I was waiting on the platform for the Piccadilly line at Green Park after another fabulous start to another fabulous week of being bullied and patronized at my super-fabulous job. As the train on the opposite side pulled away, a low collective groan rippled through the crowd. The board showed that the next Tube was stuck at Holborn. Someone on the tracks, probably. *Typical*, you could see people thinking. Why did they always have to top themselves at rush hour? The passengers across the line were moving off, among them a girl in crippling heels and an electric-blue bandage dress. *Last season's Alaïa via Zara*, I thought. Probably on her way to the stinking tourist traps of Leicester Square with the other rube losers. She had extraordinary hair, a great cascading plum-colored mane of extensions with some sort of gold thread bound through them that caught and held the neon light.

"Judeee! Judy! Is that you?"

She started waving at me enthusiastically. I pretended not to hear.

"Judy! Over here!"

People were beginning to look. The girl had hobbled precariously close to the yellow safety stripe.

"It's me! Leanne!"

"Your friend's waving to you," said the woman next to me, helpfully.

"I'll see you upstairs in a min!" I didn't hear voices like hers very often anymore. I'd never expected to hear hers again. She obviously wasn't going to disappear, and the train showed no sign of appearing, so I settled my heavy leather briefcase across my shoulder and pushed my way back through the crowd. She was waiting on the gangway between the platforms.

"Hiya! I thought it was you!"

"Hi, Leanne," I tried gingerly.

She tripped the last few steps toward me and threw her arms around me like I was her long-lost sister.

"Look at you! Dead professional. I didn't know you lived in London!" I didn't point out that this was probably because I hadn't spoken to her in a decade. Facebook friends weren't really my style, nor did I need to be reminded, ever, of where I had come from.

Then I felt like a bitch. "You look great, Leanne. I love your hair."

"I don't go by Leanne anymore, actually. It's Mercedes now."

"Mercedes? That's—nice. I use Judith mostly. Sounds more grown-up."

"Yeah, well, look at us, eh? All grown up."

I don't think I knew, then, what that felt like. I wondered if she did either.

"Listen, I've got an hour before work." *Werk*. "Do you fancy a quick drink? Catch up?"

I could have said I was busy, that I was in a rush, taken her number like I was actually going to call it. But where did I have to get to? And there was something in that voice, strangely welcome in its familiarity, that made me feel lonely and reassured at the same time. I had just two twenty-pound notes in the world, and there were three days before payday. Still, something might turn up.

"Sure," I said. "Let me buy you a drink. Let's go to the Ritz."

Two champagne cocktails in the Rivoli Bar, £38. I had twelve on my Tube card and two in hand. I just wouldn't have much to eat until the end of the week. It was stupid, maybe, to show off like that, but sometimes you need to show the world a bit of defiance. Leanne—Mercedes—fished enthusiastically with a fuchsia shellacked nail extension for the bobbing maraschino and took a cheerful slurp.

"That's dead nice, thanks. Though I prefer Roederer now, myself."

Well, that served me right for being flash.

"I work round here," I volunteered. "Art. In an auction house. I do Old Masters." I didn't, actually, but then I wasn't sweating that Leanne would know a Rubens from a Rembrandt.

"Posh," she replied. She looked bored now, fiddling with the swizzle stick in her drink. I wondered if she was sorry she had called out to me, but instead of feeling annoyed I had a pathetic feeling that I wanted to please her.

"Sounds it," I said confidentially, feeling the brandy and the sugar soothing their way into my blood, "but the pay's crap. I'm skint, usually."

"Mercedes" told me she had been in London for a year. She worked in a champagne bar in St. James's. "Reckons it's classy, but it's full of the same dirty old gits. Nothing dodgy," she added hastily. "It's only a bar. The tips are amazing, though."

She claimed she was making two grand a week. "Puts weight on you, though," she said ruefully, prodding her tiny belly. "All that drinking. Still, we don't have to pay for it. Pour it into the plants if we have to, Olly says."

"Olly?"

"He's the owner. Eh, you should come down sometime, Judy. Moonlight a bit if you're broke. Olly's always looking for girls. D'you want another one?"

An older couple in black tie, probably on their way to the opera, took the table opposite us. The woman ran her eyes critically over Mercedes's fake-tanned legs, her shimmering cleavage. Mercedes swiveled in her chair, slowly and deliberately uncrossed and recrossed her legs, giving me and the poor old bugger next to her a flash of black lace G-string, all the time staring straight into the woman's eyes. There was no need to ask if anyone had a problem.

"As I was saying," she said when the woman turned, beet-faced, to the cocktail menu, "it's a laugh." *Laff*. "The girls are from all over. You could look smashing if you got a bit dolled up. Come on."

I looked down at my black tweed Sandro suit. Nipped-in jacket, flippy little pleated skirt. It was meant to look knowingly coquettish, professional with a little Left Bank spin, at least that's what I told myself when I clumsily mended the hems for the umpteenth time, but next to Mercedes I looked like a depressed crow.

"Now?"

"Yeah, why not? I've got loads of stuff in me bag."

"I don't know, Leanne."

"Mercedes."

"Sorry."

"Come on, you can wear my lace top. It'll look ace with your tits. Unless you've got a date?"

"No," I said, tipping my head right back to catch the last drops of bubbles and angostura. "No, I haven't got a date."

## Chapter Two

I read somewhere that cause and effect are safeguards against contingency, against the terrifyingly inaccurate mutability of chance. Why did I go with Leanne that day? It hadn't been worse than any other. But choices are made before explanations, whether or not we care to know it. In the art world, there are only two auction houses you really need to know about. They're the ones who make the hundred-million-pound sales, who handle the collections of desperate dukes and socially anxious ligarchs, who funnel a thousand years' worth of beauty and artisanship through their museum-quiet rooms and turn it into hard, sexy cash. When I'd landed the job in British Pictures three years ago, I had finally felt like I'd made it. For a day or two, anyway. I soon twigged that the porters, the blokes who did the actual lifting, were the only people who cared anything about pictures. The rest of them might have been selling matchsticks or butter. Despite the fact that I'd been employed on merit, despite my hard work, diligence, and generally rather impressive knowledge of art, I was forced to admit that as far as the standards of the House went, I was distinctly not made of awesome. After a couple weeks in the department, I had realized that no one there really cared if you could tell a Brueghel from a Bonnard, that there were other, more vital codes to crack.

There were quite a few things I still liked about my job at the House after three years. I liked walking past the uniformed doorman into the orchid-scented lobby. I liked the satisfyingly reverent looks the clients reserved for experts as I climbed the imposing oak staircase, because naturally, everything about the house looked like three centuries' worth of imposing. I liked eavesdropping on the conversations of the identikit Eurosecretaries, their French and Italian vowels flicking as crisply as their hair. I liked that, unlike them, I wasn't angling to snare a passing hedgie in the tendrils of my blow-dry. I was proud of what I had achieved, winning an assistant's position after a year of interning in British Pictures. Not that I intended to remain in the department for long. I wouldn't be spending the rest of my life looking at pictures of dogs and horses.

That day, the day I bumped into Leanne, had started with an e-mail from Laura Belvoir, the deputy head of department. It was headed "Action Immediately!" yet there was no text in the body. I walked across the office to ask her what she actually wanted. The bosses had recently been on a management course and Laura had really got behind the idea of desk-to-desk digital communication, though, unfortunately, she hadn't yet worked round to typing.

"I need you to do the attributions for the Longhis."

We were preparing a series of conversation pieces by the Venetian artist for the upcoming Italian sale.

"You want me to check the titles in the warehouse?"

"No, Judith. That's Rupert's job. Go to the Heinz and see if you can identify the subjects." Rupert was the head of department and seldom appeared before eleven.

The Heinz Archive has a huge catalog of named images—I was to look up which particular English lordlings on their eighteenth-century gap-year gaities might have sat for Longhi, as identification of particular individuals could make the paintings more interesting to buyers.

"Okay. Have you got a set of photographs, please?"

Laura sighed. "In the library. They're marked as 'Longhi/ Spring.'"

Since the House occupied a whole block, it was a four-minute walk from the department to the library, and it was one I did many times every day. Despite rumors of it being the twenty-first century outside, the House was still run largely like a Victorian bank. Many of the employees spent their days plodding round the corridors, delivering scrips of paper to one another. The archive and the library were hardly even properly computerized; often one stumbled across little Dickensian ghosts wedged despairingly into obscure cubbyholes between mounds of receipts and triplicate photostatted accounts.

I retrieved the envelope of pictures and passed back to my desk for my bag. My phone rang. "Allo? It's Serena onna desk. I've got Rupert's trousers here."

So I schlepped to reception, picked up the vast bag from Rupert's tailor, couriered over the five hundred odd meters from Savile Row, and took it back to the department. Laura looked up.

"Haven't you gone yet, Judith? What on earth have you been doing? Well, since you're here, please could you get me a cappuccino? Don't go to the canteen, go to that nice little place in Crown Passage. Get a receipt."

Coffee fetched, I set off on foot toward the archive. I had five photographs in my bag, scenes at the Fenice theater, the Zattere, and a coffeehouse on the Rialto, and after working through the boxes for a couple hours, I'd made a list of twelve positive identifications of sitters who had been in Italy contemporaneously with the portraits. I cross-referenced the Heinz index with the pictures so that the attribution could be checked for the catalog and took them back to Laura.

"What are these?"

"The Longhis you asked me to do."

"These are the Longhis from the sale six years ago. Really, Judith. The photos were on my e-mail to you this morning." That would have been the e-mail with no content.

"But, Laura, you said they were in the library."

"I meant the electronic library."

I didn't say anything. I logged on to the department's online catalog, found the correct pictures (filed as Lunghi), downloaded them to my phone, and went back to the Heinz with a flea in my ear

from Laura for wasting time. I'd finished the second lot of attributions by the time she was back from lunch at the Caprice, and got on with cold-calling invitees who hadn't RSVP'd to the private view for the sale. Then I wrote up the bios and e-mailed them to Laura and Rupert, showed Laura how to open the attachment, took the Tube to the Applied Arts depository near Chelsea Harbour to check on a silk sample that Rupert thought might match with a hanging in the Longhis, discovered to no one's surprise that it didn't, walked most of the way back because the Circle Line was stuck at Edgware Road, and detoured to Lillywhites on Piccadilly to pick up a sleeping bag for Laura's son's school camping trip, reappearing exhausted and grimy at five-thirty to another reprimand for missing the departmental viewing of the paintings I'd spent the morning working on.

"Honestly, Judith," Laura remarked, "you'll never make any progress if you're haring about town when you could be looking at the works."

Twitches on invisible threads aside, maybe it wasn't all that surprising that when I came across Leanne at the Tube station a little later, I really did feel like a drink.

### Chapter Three

My interview at the Gstaad Club that night consisted of Olly, the giant, morose Finn who was proprietor, maître d', and bouncer, looking me over in the lacy nude blouse I'd hastily shuffled on in the loos at the Ritz.

"Can you drink?" he asked me.

"She's from Liverpool," giggled "Mercedes," and that was that.

So for the next eight weeks, I worked Thursday and Friday nights in the club. Not hours that most people my age would welcome, but after-work drinks with the team weren't really a big feature of my career. The name, like everything else about the place, was a dated stab at fake class; the only thing that was real about the club was the truly eye-watering markup on the champagne. In fact, it didn't look much different from Annabel's, the has-been nightclub a few streets away in Berkeley Square. Same eighties yellow walls, same bad-good pictures, same collection of tragic paunchy older men, same lounging gaggle of girls who were not quite hookers but who always needed a little help with the rent. The job was simple. About ten girls gathered half an hour before opening at nine for a pick-me-up dispensed by Carlo the bartender in his immaculately pressed but slightly fusty white jacket. The rest of the staff consisted of an ancient babushka who took the coats and Olly. At nine sharp he unbolted the street door and made the same solemn joke.

"Okay, girls, knickers off."

AFTER OPENING, we sat about chatting, flicking through celebrity mags or texting for an hour until the customers started to drift in, almost always alone. The idea was that a customer would pick the girl he liked and take her to sit in one of the pink-velvet-swagged alcoves, which was known rather bluntly as "getting booked." When you were booked, your objective was to get the punter to order as many ridiculously overpriced bottles of champagne as possible. We got no wages, just ten percent on every bottle and whatever the customer chose to leave. My first night, I reeled away from the table halfway through the third bottle and had to ask the babushka to hold my hair while I made myself throw up.

"Stupid girl," she said, with gloomy satisfaction. "Is not for you to be drinking it."

So I learned. Carlo served the champagne with huge, goldfish bowl-sized glasses, which we would empty into the ice bucket or the flowers as soon as the customer left the table. Another strategy was to persuade him to invite a "friend" to share a glass. The girls wore pumps, never

open-toed sandals, as another ruse was to teasingly persuade him to sip some out of your shoe. You can pour a surprising amount of champagne into a size 39 Louboutin. If all else failed, we just tipped the stuff on the floor.

At first, it seemed miraculous to me that the place stayed open at all. It seemed positively Edwardian, all the heavy-handed flirting and the exorbitant fee for our company. Why would any man bother when he could order up whatever he wanted on his I-Hooker app? It was all so painfully old-fashioned. But I gradually realized that this was exactly what kept the guys coming back. They weren't after sex, though plenty of them could get a bit frisky after a few goldfish bowls. They weren't players, these guys, even in their dreams. They were ordinary middle-aged married blokes who for a few hours wanted to pretend to themselves that they were on a real date, with a real girl, a pretty girl, nicely dressed, with decent manners, who actually wanted to *talk* to them. Mercedes, with her talons and her extensions, was the official naughty girl, for customers who wanted something a bit more racy, but Olly preferred the rest of us to dress in plain, well-cut dresses, not too much makeup, clean hair, discreet jewelry. They didn't want risk, or mess, or their wives finding out, or probably even the embarrassment and trouble of having to get it up. Unbelievably pathetic as it was, they just wanted to feel wanted.

Olly knew his market, and he catered to it perfectly. There was a tiny dance floor in the club, with Carlo doubling as DJ, to give the idea that at any moment our chap might spin us off into the disco night, though we were never to encourage this. There was a menu, with perfectly acceptable steak and scallops and ice-cream sundaes—middle-aged men like to watch girls eat fattening desserts. Obviously, the knickerbocker glories stayed down just as long as it took us to make a discreet trip to the loo. Girls who took drugs or who were too obviously slutty didn't last a night—a Polite Notice by the gents proclaimed that it was Strictly Forbidden to offer to Escort any of the Young Ladies Outside the Club. They were meant to aspire to us.

I found myself looking forward to Thursday and Friday nights. With the exception of Leanne (I couldn't really think of her as Mercedes yet), the girls were neither friendly nor unfriendly, pleasant but incurious. They didn't appear interested in my life, perhaps because none of the details they revealed about their own were real. The first night, as we swung a little unsteadily down Albemarle Street, Leanne suggested I choose a name to use in the club. My middle name was Lauren: neutral, untelling. I said I was studying the history of art part-time. All the girls seemed to be studying something—business administration, mostly—and perhaps some of them were. None of them were English; clearly the idea that they were working in the bar to try to better themselves struck some sort of Eliza Doolittle chord with the punters. Leanne was flattening out her raucous Scouse—cushion came out as “cashion”; I modified my own accent, the one I used at work, which had become the voice I dreamed in, to make it a little less obviously Received Pronunciation, but to Olly's evident satisfaction, I still sounded relatively “posh.”

At my day job, in Prince Street, there were those million tiny codes. Anyone's placement on the social scale could be calibrated to the *n*th degree at a single glance, and learning the rules was a lot more difficult than identifying paintings, because the whole point of those rules was that if you were on the inside, you never had to be told. Those hours of carefully teaching myself how to speak and how to walk might have passed the test with most people—Leanne, for instance, seemed bemused and grudgingly impressed by my transformation—but somewhere inside the House was a hidden casket of Alice in Wonderland keys that I would never possess, keys that unlocked ever tinier gardens whose walls were all the more impregnable because they were invisible. At the Gstaad, though, I was the token “toff,” and the girls, if they thought about it at all, believed there was no distinction between the soccer players' girlfriends and the superannuated debutantes who occupied adjoining pages in *OK!* magazine. Of course, in a deeper sense they would have been right.

The chat at the club was mostly about clothes, the acquisition of designer-brand shoes and handbags, and men. Some of the girls claimed to have steady boyfriends, many of them married, in which case it was the done thing to complain about their boyfriends endlessly; others were dating, in which case it was the done thing to complain about their dates endlessly. To Natalia and

Anastasia and Martina and Karolina it seemed a self-evident truth that men were a necessary evil, to be endured for the sake of shoes, handbags, and Saturday-night trips to Japanese restaurants in Knightsbridge. There was a lot of analysis of texts, their frequency and affection, but any emotional response was reserved for the possibility that the men were seeing other women or failing to provide sufficient gifts. Plots and counterplots—with elaborate iPhone ruses—ensued, there was talk of men with boats, men with planes, even, but I never got the sense that any of this involved pleasure. Love was not a language any of us dealt in; fresh skins and tight thighs were our currency, only of value to those too old to take it for granted. Older men, it was generally agreed, were less bother on the whole, though they came in for a good deal of raucous shrieking about their physical deficiencies. Baldness and halitosis and the Viagra-grind was reality; though you would never have known that from the coquettish messagings that formed communication between the girls and their men. This was the way of their world, and they kept their contempt and their occasional tears for the other girls.

For the first time, in the Gstaad, I had what felt like girlfriends, and I was a bit ashamed of how happy it made me. I hadn't had friends at school. I had had quite a few black eyes, an aggressively haughty attitude, a truanting issue, and a healthy appreciation of the joy of sex, but friends I didn't have time for. Beyond explaining that we had met up north, Leanne and I had an unspoken agreement that we had been teenage chums (if not actively taking part in holding someone's face in the lavatory cistern could count as being chummy) and never referred to it. Apart from Frankie, the department secretary at the House, the only constant female presence in my life had been my flatmates, two earnest Korean girls studying medicine at Imperial. We had a cleaning rota pinned up in the bathroom, which we all stuck to politely enough, and beyond that there was barely any need for conversation. With the exception of the women I met at the particular kind of parties I liked to go to, I'd only ever expected to encounter hostility and scorn from my own sex. I'd never learned how to gossip, or advise, or listen to the endless rehashings of thwarted desire. But here I found I could join in. On the Tube, I swapped reading *The Burlington Magazine* and *The Economist* for *Heat* and *Closer*, so that when the talk of men palled I too could fall back on the endless soap opera of film stars. I invented a broken heart (implications of an abortion) to explain my lack of dates, I was Not Ready, and I enjoyed being advised that it was time to Get Closure and Move On. My odd nocturnal excursion I kept strictly to myself. It suited me, I realized, this strange little concentrated universe, where the world outside felt faraway, where nothing was quite real. It made me feel safe.

LEANNE HADN'T LIED about the money. Exaggerated, maybe, but it was still pretty extraordinary. Counting my percentage on the bottles as cab fare home, I was making about six hundred a week clear in tips, crumpled twenties and fifties, sometimes more. A fortnight took care of my pathetic overdraft, and a few weeks later I took the Sunday train to an outlet center near Oxford and made a few investments. A black Moschino skirt suit to replace the poor old Sandro, an achingly plain white Balenciaga cocktail dress, Lanvin flats, a DVF print day dress. I finally had my National Health Service teeth lasered in Harley Street, I made an appointment at Richard Ward and had my hair recut so that it looked subtly the same but five times as expensive. None of this was for the club. For that I got a few simple dresses from the high street and tarted them up with patent Loubie pumps. I cleared a shelf in my wardrobe and carefully placed most of my acquisitions there, wrapped in dry cleaner's tissue. I liked to look at them, count them through like a stage miser. When I was little I had loved old-fashioned boarding-school stories, midnight feasts in the dormitory, and feats of triumph on the sports field. The new clothes were my gymslip and my lacrosse stick, the uniform of who I was going to be.

He started coming in after I had been at the club a month. Thursday was usually the Gstaad's busiest night, before men up on business went back to the country, but it was pouring outside and there were only two customers in the bar. Magazines and phones were not allowed as soon as the punters appeared, so the girls were listless, popping out to crouch under the awning for cigarettes, awkwardly trying to protect their hair from frizzing in the wet. The bell went and Olly came in. "Sit up straight, ladies! It's your lucky night!" A few minutes later, one of the grossest men I had ever seen swung a vast belly into the room. He didn't even attempt a bar stool, but thumped down

immediately on the nearest banquette, waving Carlo irritably away until he had removed his tie and mopped his face with a handkerchief. He had that slatternly look that only really extraordinary tailoring can solve, and his tailor had clearly been overwhelmed. His open jacket revealed a taut cream shirt stretched over the gut that rested on his splayed knees, folds of neck swagged over his collar, and even his shoes looked overstuffed. He asked for a glass of ice water.

"Haven't seen Fatty for a while," someone hissed.

The form was for the girls to talk animatedly, with a lot of hair tossing and glances beneath our lashes, looking as though we just happened to be there, unescorted in our smart dresses, until the client made his selection. The fat man was a quick chooser. He nodded to me, the flabby mottled curtains of his cheeks swishing back in a smile. As I crossed the floor I noted the regimental stripe on the discarded tie, the signet ring embedded in the swell of his little finger. Eeew.

"I'm Lauren," I said, smiling breathily. "Would you like me to join you?"

"James," he supplied.

I sat down neatly, legs crossed at the ankle, and looked at him, all twinkling expectance. No talking until they ordered.

"I suppose you want me to buy you a drink?" He said it grudgingly, as though he knew how the club worked but still felt it an imposition.

"Thank you. That would be lovely."

He didn't look at the list. "What's the most expensive?"

"I think—"

I hesitated.

"Just get on with it."

"Well, James, that would be the Cristal 2005. Would you like that?"

"Get it. I don't drink."

I gave the nod to Carlo before he changed his mind. The 2005 was a violent three grand. Three hundred up to me already. Hey, Big Spender.

Carlo carried the bottle over as though it was his firstborn son, but James waved him away, uncorked it, and dutifully filled the goldfish bowls.

"Do you like champagne, Lauren?" he asked.

I allowed myself a wry little smile. "Well, it can get a bit monotonous."

"Why don't you give that to your friends and order something you want?"

I liked him for that. He was physically repellent, true, but there was something brave about the fact that he didn't require me to pretend. I ordered a Hennessy and sipped it slowly, and he told me a little bit about his profession, which was money, of course, and then he heaved himself to his feet and waddled out, leaving five hundred pounds in new fifties on the table. The next night, he



came back and did exactly the same. Leanne texted me on Wednesday morning to say that he had come to ask for Lauren on Tuesday, and on Thursday he reappeared, a few minutes after opening time. Several of the girls had “regulars,” but none so generous, and it gave me a new status among them. Slightly to my surprise, there was no jealousy. But after all, business was business.

## Chapter Four

Once I’d started working at the club, the daily humiliations of my life in the department were thrown into glaring relief. At the Gstaad, there was at least the illusion that I held the cards. I tried to tell myself that it *amused* me that my straight life, my “real” life, separated by just a few London streets from Olly and the girls, was bereft of any value or power. At the club, I felt prized every time I crossed my legs, whereas at my actual job, the one that was supposed to be my career, I was still pretty much a dogsbody. Actually, the Gstaad and the world’s most elitist art store had more in common than it was comfortable to admit.

Working at the House could be disappointing, but I still remembered the first time that I had really *seen* a painting, and that memory still glowed within me. Bronzino’s allegory, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, at the National Gallery, in Trafalgar Square. I still find the picture soothing, not only for the mannered, mysterious elegance of its composition—playful and innocently erotic, or darkly reminiscent of mortality and death—but because no scholar has so far advanced an accepted theory of what it means. Its beauty lies somewhere within the frustration it provokes.

It was a school trip to London, hot hours in a coach with the smell of sausage rolls and cheese crisps, the popular girls yakking and squabbling in the back seats, our teachers looking strangely vulnerable in unaccustomed casual clothes. We had gawped through the gates of Buckingham Palace, then plodded down the Mall to the gallery in our navy uniform sweatshirts, just pin on the name badge and you’re ready for the call center. Boys skidded on the parquet floors, girls made loud, coarse remarks at every nude we passed. I tried to wander away alone, wanting to get lost in the seemingly endless rooms of images, when I came across the Bronzino at random.

It was as though I’d tripped and fallen down a hole, a gasping sense of quickly recovered shock, the brain lagging behind the body. There was the goddess, there her boy child, there the mysterious old man standing over them. I did not know then who they were, but I recognized, blindingly, that I had not known lack until I watched those delicate colors glow and twine. And then I knew desire too, the first sense that I knew what I wanted and what I didn’t have. I hated the feeling. I hated that everything I had known suddenly looked ugly to me, and that the source of that feeling, its mysterious pull and lure, was shining at me from this picture.

“Rashers is perving on that naked woman!”

Leanne and a couple of her cronies had caught up with me.

“Fucking lezza!”

“Lezzaaaaaah!”

Their harsh, screeching voices were disturbing the other visitors, heads were turning, and my face burned with shame. Leanne’s hair had been an orangish blond back then, viciously permed and gelled into a peruke on her crown. Like her friends, she wore thick tan foundation and smudged black eyeliner.

“They really shouldn’t let them in if they can’t behave,” I heard one voice saying. “I know it’s free, but—”

“I know,” interrupted another. “Little animals.”

They looked at us as though we smelled bad. I wondered if we did to them. I hated the disdain in those smooth, educated voices; I hated being lumped in with the others. But Leanne had heard them too.

"You can fuck off an'all," she said aggressively. "Or are you fucking lezzas too?"

The two women who had spoken looked, simply, appalled. They did not remonstrate, just walked calmly away into the deeper galleries. My eyes followed them hungrily. I turned to the girls.

"They might complain. We might get chucked out."

"So what? It's last here anyway. What's your problem, Rashers?"

I'd already got pretty good at fighting. My mother, when she bothered to notice me at all, was gentle with my blacked eyes and bruises, but mostly I tried to hide the evidence. Even then, she regarded me as a changeling. I could have started in on Leanne right there, yet—maybe it was the picture, maybe the knowledge of the women behind me—I didn't want to. I wasn't going to demean myself like that, not anymore.

So I didn't make anything of it. I tried to wrap myself in contempt like a fur coat, to show them that they were so far beneath me that they weren't worth my attention. By the time school was over, I'd made a pretty good job of convincing myself of that. I had saved for two years for my first trip to northern Italy as a teenager, working in a petrol station, sweeping up bleached worms of hair in a beauty salon, slicing my fingers on foil cartons in the Chinese takeaway, dripping blood into the Friday-night drunks' sweet-and-sour pork. I'd provided myself with a gap year in Paris and a month's foundation course in Rome.

I had thought things might be different when I got into university. I had never really seen people who looked like that, let alone a place that looked like that. They belonged together, those beings and those buildings; all those generations of effortless entitlement melded honeyed stone and honeyed skin to an architectural perfection in every time-polished detail. I had lovers at college, yes, but if you look the way I look and, frankly, like the things I like, maybe girlfriends won't ever be your thing. I told myself I didn't need them, and besides, between the library and my part-time jobs there hadn't been much time for anything except reading.

I didn't stick to the books on my course list: along with Gombrich and Bourdieu I read hundreds of novels, scouring them for details of the customs of the strange country of class, of how to speak, the vocabulary that marks out those who belong to the invisible club from those who don't. I worked endlessly at my languages: French and Italian were the tongues of art. I read *Le Monde* and *Foreign Affairs*, *Country Life* and *Vogue* and *Opéra Magazine* and *Tatler* and polo magazines and *Architectural Digest* and the *Financial Times*. I taught myself about wine, about rare book bindings and old silver, I went to all the free recitals I could, first for duty and then for pleasure, I learned the correct use of the dessert fork and how to imitate the accent on which the sun has never set. I knew better by then than to try to pretend I was something I was not, but I thought if I became a good enough chameleon, no one would ever think to ask.

It wasn't snobbery that kept me at it. Partly, it was relief at being in an environment where confessing to an interest in anything apart from fucking reality shows wasn't an invitation to a cracked jaw. Mostly, when I had played hookie, it was to get the bus into town to visit the Picton Reading Room at the Central Library, or the Walker Art Gallery, because those quiet spaces breathed something more to me than the beauties they contained. They were civilized. And being civilized meant knowing about the right things. However much people pretend that doesn't matter, it's true. Disclaiming that is as foolish as thinking that beauty doesn't matter. And to get among the right things, you have to be among the people who possess them. Since one also likes to be thorough, knowing the difference between a hereditary and an honorary marquess always comes

in handy.

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED at the auction house, it seemed to have worked pretty well, the edges were smoothed off. I got on well with Frankie, the department secretary, even if she had a voice that sounded like a memsahib ordering her bearers over the plains and friends to whom she actually referred as “Pongo” and “Squeak.” Frankie fit in in a way I never could, quite, but at the same time she seemed to be floundering a bit in the brash new tide of money that was slowly seeping into the House. The art world had woken from its genteel slumbers in a billionaire’s playground, where girls like Frankie were slowly becoming extinct. She had once confided to me rather mournfully that she would prefer to live in the country but that her mother thought she had more chance of “meeting someone” with a job in town. Though Frankie was an avid reader of *Grazia*, she never seemed to follow any of the makeover tips—she wore an unironic velvet hairband and her arse looked like a giant tweedy mushroom. Once I had to steer her gently away from a truly disastrous turquoise taffeta ball gown on a sneaky dash to Peter Jones. I didn’t think her mother needed to worry about ordering the engraved invitations anytime soon, but I admired Frankie’s unapologetic style, her magnificent disdain for diets, and her perennial optimism that she would someday meet “the One.” I really hoped she would; I could see her in a Georgian rectory, dishing out fish pie in front of the stove to an adoring and wholesome family. Sometimes we had lunch together, and while I couldn’t get enough of her Pony Club childhood, she seemed to like hearing about the (strictly edited) escapades of my own upbringing too.

Frankie was definitely one of the things I liked about my job: the other was Dave, who worked as a porter in the warehouse. Dave was pretty much the only other person at the House whom I felt actually liked me. He had left a leg just inside the Iraqi border in the first Iraq War and got into art documentaries while he was convalescing. He had a fantastic natural eye and a quick mind; his passion was the eighteenth century. He’d told me once that after what he’d seen in the Gulf it was sometimes the only thing that kept him going, the chance to be close to great pictures. You could see the love in the tender way he handled them. I respected the sincerity of his interest, as well as his knowledge, and I’d certainly learned more about pictures from Dave than from any of my superiors in the department.

We flirted, of course, the nearest I ever got to watercooler banter, but I also liked Dave because he was safe. Beneath his occasional saucy joke, he took a rather old-fashioned, paternal interest in me. He’d even sent me a congratulations card when I got promoted. But I knew he was happily married—his wife was always referred to as “my missus”—and to put it bluntly, it was relaxing to be around a guy who didn’t want to fuck me. Aside from rococo art, Dave’s other pleasure in life was garish “true crime” paperbacks. Marital cannibalism was a popular trend, with many a disgruntled wife serving her husband as a pâté accompanied by a nicely chilled chardonnay, and Dave, whose encounters with weaponry had been efficient and gun-shaped, delighted in the Shakespearean ingenuity of their fatal instruments. It was astonishing what you could do with a pair of curling tongs and a penknife if you put your mind to it. We had many a happy double-fag break in the dusty area of the warehouse, analyzing the latest trends in gruesome murders, and I wondered sometimes how his interests connected, whether the prettified gods and goddesses who cavorted delicately through the canvases Dave loved were a solace for the violence he had witnessed, or an acknowledgment in their often-erotic beauty that the classical world was as brutal and cruel as anything he had witnessed in the desert. If I was impressed by Dave’s self-taught expertise, he was sometimes embarrassingly respectful of my own specialist status. One morning after my latest evening with James, a Friday in early July, I had a few minutes before the department opened, so I ducked into the warehouse to find Dave. It had been a long night at the Gstaad and my retinas felt raw with smoke and sleeplessness. Dave clocked it when he saw I had my sunglasses on at nine a.m.

“Rough night, darlin’?”

He produced a mug of sweet tea, ibuprofen, and a Galaxy. Nothing like crap chocolate for a bad head. Dave kindly maintained the fancy that like many of the other girls who worked there I lived

a dazzling social life among the reeling toffs of Chelsea. I didn't enlighten him. Once I felt human enough to remove the shades, I got a pad and my tape from my case to start measuring a small series of Neapolitan landscapes for the upcoming "Grand Tour" sale.

"Shocking," Dave remarked, "putting that on at two hundred reserve as a Romney. It's barely a 'school of.'"

"Shocking," I muttered in agreement, pen between my teeth. One of the first things I'd learned at the House was that the reserve is the minimum price a seller requires a piece to fetch. I jerked my head toward his back pocket. "New book, Dave?"

"Yeah, I'll lend it to you if you like. Smashing."

"Remind me when Romney was in Italy?"

"1773 to 1775. Rome and Venice, mostly. So, this bloke's wife did him in the Cuisinart. In Ohio."

"As if, Dave."

"As if that's a Romney."

My phone pinged with a text from Rupert, the head of department. I had to get out on a valuation the minute I'd taken the notes up.

At his desk, Rupert was treating himself to what was probably his third breakfast of the morning, a sausage sandwich that had already oozed mustard onto one of his heavy double cuffs. I'd be off to the dry cleaner again later, I thought ruefully. What was it about me and fat men? He gave me an address in St. John's Wood and the client details, and told me to get a move on, but as I reached the door of his office, he called out to me.

"Er, Judith?" One of the many things I hated about Rupert was his affectation that my first name was "Er."

"Yes, Rupert?"

"About these Whistlers—"

"I read up on them yesterday, like you told me."

"Er, yes, but please remember that Colonel Morris is a very significant client. He will expect absolute professionalism."

"Of course, Rupert."

Maybe I didn't hate Rupert so much, I thought. He was trusting me with a serious valuation. I'd been sent on a few jobs before, minor things, even out of London a couple times, but this was the first opportunity I'd had to speak to a "significant" client. I took it as a good sign, that my boss's confidence in me was growing. If I could judge the price right, accurate but appealing to the seller, I could score the deal for the House by acquiring the pieces for sale. Whistler was a major artist, one who attracted serious collectors, and could mean serious money for the House.

To celebrate, I charged a cab to the department's account, even though we juniors weren't permitted cabs. That budget was reserved for vital transportation such as fetching Rupert from the Wolseley round the corner on Piccadilly. I got off a few streets from the address so that I could walk quietly under the summer-heavy trees by the canal. My head was clear now, and there was a

scent of wet lilac from security-walled gardens. It made me smile to think that these streets, with their gangs of solemn Filipina nannies and Polish workmen installing vast basement pools, had once been little more than a vast and notorious high-class brothel, where women waited behind heavy plush curtains, arranged like Etty nudes, for their lovers to call on the way home from the city. London had always been and would always be a city of whores.