

**THE
ENGLISH
MASTERPIECE**

A NOVEL

HARPER
MUSE

KATHERINE REAY



HARPER MUSE

The English Masterpiece

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**TO MOM AND DAD,
HAPPY 60TH ANNIVERSARY!
ALL MY LOVE,
KATHERINE**



Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.

—PABLO PICASSO

Everything is expressed through relationships.

—PIET MONDRIAN



CHAPTER 1

Lily

LONDON, ENGLAND

9 APRIL 1973

come see me as soon as you arrive

After sliding my boss's note into my top desk drawer, I walk down the corridor and tap on Diana's door and, as usual, pause for a second or two before I open it. I used to wait until she called me in, but over the last couple of years—as we've come to work more closely together—it feels natural and efficient to simply signal my entrance rather than ask permission. After all, many times she's on the telephone. My discreetly stepping in feels more respectful than interrupting her.

As usual, this morning she's on the telephone, nodding and murmuring her agreement to something said across the line. Her face is dour, stern. Her slender shoulders curl in as if she's protecting herself. What's gone wrong so early on a Monday? I settle myself in the chair across from her desk, lay my notepad in my lap, and, pressing my pencil atop it, sit ready to take notes.

The call stretches on and my thoughts and eyes start to wander. Diana is the Tate Gallery's keeper of the Modern Collections—the first female keeper in the United Kingdom at any major institution—and her office reflects her stature and her tastes. It's a beautiful space. My focus first settles upon her desk. Despite sitting across from it hundreds of times, I never

tire of taking it in. It's massive, imperious, and simply stunning. It's not fluted or curved, as George IV designs aren't frilly, but its formidable bulk, wood inlays, and detailing convey delicacy nonetheless. Power too. A dichotomy held in perfect balance by both this impressive desk and the woman who owns it—because she must own it. Otherwise such a valuable antique, if from the Gallery's collection, would certainly grace Director Browning's office rather than hers.

We've all heard the rumors. Family money. Old European roots. Hohenberg ties and generational estates sprinkled from east to west along the Danube. Diana has let a little of her history slip out over our five years together, but just a little. The rest I've picked up from gossip around the Gallery. A wisp from those who like and respect her; most from those who want her to fail. But it's not her history so much as her reticence in sharing it that impresses me most. Her example has taught me that if you have status, money, and power, you don't need to talk about it. Rather you wear it lightly, effortlessly, like an Egyptian cotton shift on a warm summer day.

When I started working for Diana, I thought I'd won the golden ticket, a secretarial job that fit my skills in a world that means everything to me. But it's become so much more—a career beyond my wildest dreams. Not only has Diana succeeded in an industry—because make no mistake, art *is* an industry—where most women flounder, but she opened the way for me to succeed as well, promoting me to assistant keeper of the Modern Collections last December—an unheard-of promotion that sent shock waves through the London museum scene.

Her belief in me has definitely engendered my loyalty to her, and I lean forward, offering my silent support for whatever has upset her so.

She nods in understanding, and my gaze again shifts, this time from her face to the crystal dish that sits to her left, as with delicate fingers, nails varnished a demure shade of pink, she reaches for the gold key she keeps there. She disappears behind the desk to open one of the file drawers that make up its two sides.

Diana emerges again and sets the folder she's retrieved in front of her and ends the call with, "*Nosotras hablaremos pronto. Gracias.*"

Spanish. I think of the Prado and the Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla. I think of Gaudi, Dalí, Picasso, and Miro. I think of—

"Lily?"

"Yes?" I blink.

"Pablo Picasso died yesterday."

I glance to the edge of her desk. *The Times* the security guard delivers every morning sits crumpled. I haven't read the paper yet and chastise myself for being unprepared. I had heard the great artist was ill, but I didn't expect this news. Did anyone? The gods are immortal, after all, aren't they? "I'm sorry."

She offers a slight shrug. The motion accentuates the hollows beneath her collarbone. Her lithe frame always reminds me of Twiggy, not that she'd appreciate the comparison.

"That was Antonia at the Sofia. She's pulling together an exhibit to honor him in Madrid this summer."

I lift my pen, suspecting we'll do the same.

But rather than race into the day as Diana usually does in our morning meetings, she sits back, and her face, always chiseled and in motion, falls slack. "Do you remember the doves?"

I laugh and drift into the memory. In my third year here, Picasso reached his ninetieth birthday and towns and museums all over the world conjured outlandish ways to celebrate, both to honor and to curry favor with him. Director Browning invited eighty-nine schoolchildren to line the Tate's massive front stone steps and gave each a dove to hold in homage to the great artist's *Child with a Dove*. All the children laughed and twittered, trying to control their birds with small hands, which gripped the poor creatures much too tightly. Then Richard, holding the ninetieth dove himself, called upon the children to lift their birds high and cued the press to ready their cameras. At the count of three, ninety birds were launched into the air.

Happy Birthday, Picasso!

Chaos ensued. Children laughed, screamed, and ducked. Cameras

clicked. And the Tate Gallery's massive stone steps were covered in so much bird poop that it took Maintenance a full day to hand scrub it away. But it was also the best day ever! And to commemorate it, everyone in attendance was gifted a beautiful print of the painting. Mine still rests atop my desk.

"We, too, must do something." Diana pulls herself straight. "We've got a problem and this might be our solution."

I cringe. We don't have *a* problem—we have several. First of all, last week I handed my boss the expenditures and projections for the American New Realism Exhibition she installed at the Tate's Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens three months ago. It's out of money—with four months left to go.

It's not Diana's fault, though she's being blamed for it. Nor is there anything wrong with the exhibit. It's bold, cutting-edge, and it's the Serpentine Gallery's first international exhibition. The initial press was stunning. But labor strikes, inflation, and mounting economic fears have people tightening their belts in all sorts of ways. Donations are down, as is attendance—the exhibit has only achieved a tenth of our conservative estimations, and enthusiasm for the arts in general is waning as well. I guess such a mindset doesn't readily welcome the new, the bold, or the American.

To counter that problem, only yesterday Diana devised an add-on for the exhibit's final month. She hopes to lessen the American influence by promoting a British one. The British Emerging Artists Exhibition. New works and new names that will shift the focus from the Yanks and put it back here at home, with the added benefit of garnering government funds and encouraging more local support. I love her idea. I have plans for her idea. I hope to be part of it—I push away the thought.

The next problem of late is that one of our major donors, Ian Campbell, the eleventh Duke of Argyll, passed away as well. His death, just this past Saturday—I did read about that one—has put our year-end fiscal plans in jeopardy, not to mention our entire 1974 budget. Anticipating it, Diana has been devising ways to bring in new donors, but it's proving a tough problem as some are

calling the tensions and wariness of this time as dire as the days preceding the Second World War.

“Let’s use the far north gallery room and install a small Picasso exhibition. Intimate. Exclusive. Not the showstoppers. Well, some of the showstoppers. An exhibit that will focus on *his* favorites. Personal pieces with meaning.”

I start scribbling notes. “When?”

“Two weeks?” Her voice lifts in question. Part of me suspects she’s asking herself, pondering the feasibility of pulling off something of this magnitude so soon, but another part believes she’s asking my opinion as well.

I straighten in my chair. “It’s tight, but . . .” My voice drifts away because I don’t have a good answer. We need to be realistic. The logistics of such a show, even a small and intimate one, are astounding. But I also believe we can do it. Together Diana and I can do anything.

I lift my brows as I mentally list all we would need to accomplish for what she envisions to become reality within fourteen short days. “Are you wanting paintings from the Continent?”

“A few. There are a couple at the Louvre I’ll request and one or two from Spain.”

“You’ll need *Woman in an Armchair* and at least a few of the engraved plates from the *Vollard Suite*.”

“Of course.” Her face regains a touch of its usual animation. “My favorites. I also want *The Old Guitarist* from the Art Institute in Chicago. It shouldn’t be too hard, not for something like this. The Yanks always want to be the center of things.”

I feel my nose scrunch as I murmur my agreement. But I don’t truly agree. Her confidence of obtaining one of Picasso’s most famous paintings from Chicago is overly optimistic. Our recent requests for loans from MoMA and the Met have been summarily—even rudely—turned down. I can’t imagine Chicago’s Art Institute will be more obliging, especially as it, too, will want to honor the world’s greatest artist.

Pencil to paper, I mark out the days. “Shipping from America

will take over a week with a rush on it. Then there's the paperwork, installation, press—"

Diana cuts me off with a wave of her hand, gold bracelets tinkling with the quick motion. "We can't let any of that stall us. This exhibition must make an impact, and that is as much about art as it is about timing." She claps her hands together and leaves them in midair, palm pressing palm. "There's a lot on the line here, Lily. For both of us."

I swallow down all my objections. She's right. Many would like to see her fail. She's also right; my star rises only as hers continues to shine.

"I'll make a few telephone calls. Return in half an hour and I'll let you know how far I've gotten."

I stand, impressed with her boldness—as always.

"Also, request catering menus from the café for an opening champagne luncheon. We'll hold it in the room next to the north gallery. Tell Jeffrey I want him to clear his landscapes for a minimum of three days for setup, then he can reinstall on the twenty-fifth."

I bite my lip, hoping she isn't serious about me telling the keeper of the British Collections to "clear his landscapes." He's one who would love to see Diana fail.

She writes a quick note and hands it to me.

picasso exhibition, 1960

"Pass that to Lucy in Archives. I want everything we have on that exhibition." She points her Montblanc pen to the note card in my hand. "That was the 'blockbuster' one, first of its kind, and it changed the art world completely. We want this one to hearken to that moment in history and remind people of the Tate's pivotal role within our nation's and the world's relationship with Picasso."

I glance at the card and an incongruent thought comes to me. "Why don't you use capital letters?"

Diana blinks. "Excuse me?"

I wave the thick card stock. “Your notes. You never use capitalization.”

“I . . .” Her voice fades away. “I didn’t realize I still did that.”

“When did you start?” I drop into the bucket chair across from her desk again. Though infrequent, these are my favorite moments with my boss. She rarely lets anything personal escape, but when she does it’s always interesting.

“When I painted.” She sighs. “I wanted a signature with style so I signed my first pieces with no capitals, and I suppose I carried it on from there.”

“Diana Gilden.” I say her name slowly and imagine each letter in my mind. “The *d* going up, in contrast to the dipping *g*, would have been a unique look.”

“Yes. No.” She shakes her head as if waking. “I mean, it was a long time ago.”

“Do you still paint?”

“Never.” The single word is short, sharp, and tastes bitter floating between us. Its afternotes carry a hint of regret.

The office’s atmosphere, which felt amicable though somber seconds ago, strikes me with prickly, sharp edges now. I tap my pencil against my notepad to draw us back to work. “I’ll start my list immediately and call Catering.”

“Yes. Do.” She sets her pen on her desk and straightens it so it lies perfectly parallel with her leather blotter. Her hand trembles. I stand and turn away before she can see I notice.

“Call Richard’s secretary and ask when he’s available.”

I look back and watch as she blows a soft sigh through pursed lips. “If this is going to work, somehow I’ll have to convince him this is his idea.”

After closing the door quietly, I rush back to my desk to call the director’s secretary. Diana is right—again. If Richard says no, there is no point in going one step further. But if he says yes, we’ve got mountains to move in two weeks’ time . . .

CHAPTER 2

Diana

MONDAY, 23 APRIL

Diana opens the front door of her Mayfair home and steps into the marble foyer, noting as she always does the chessboard squares of black and white. This flooring always brightens her mood. The high mirrored shine of the black. The almost translucent pureness of the white. Only the finest marbles possess that water-like luminosity. The elegance. The contrast. The game.

She drops her keys into the Royal Delft bowl centered on the Louis XV table and lays her Hermès bag next to it. She then proceeds into the kitchen to the left and there she finds, lit by a single candle, her dinner. Her stomach growls as she takes in their butler's thoughtfulness, just as she smiled with pleasure the day before at the large and opulent vase of fresh-cut flowers Branford arranged in the center of the dining room table.

This evening the small plate of cheeses, grapes, apple slices, and crackers set upon the kitchen countertop, warm and welcoming, is just what she needs. It is the type of meal that can be an appetizer or a preparation for a glorious main dish. A meal that hints at more to come. And tomorrow more will come. The main dish will arrive. After a fortnight of meticulous planning and nonstop work, the Picasso Commemorative Exhibition is ready and she anticipates luxuriating in every aspect of her success. It will be glorious. It will be world-class. It will be all hers.

Diana picks up a piece of white cheddar and savors the dry

crumbling cube as it dissolves on her tongue with a sharp tang. She follows it with a bite of cold apple and notes the interplay between sharp and sweet, soft and crisp. She runs her finger over the gold scalloped edge of the Spode plate, delighting in its candle-light burnish.

She stills, noting a coolness in the house. It feels too empty, too quiet. Where might her husband be? A quick circle of the entire floor confirms Heinrich isn't present. Not in the kitchen or the dining room. Not in his library reading. Not in the living room, sitting in his favorite wing chair by the fire enjoying a glass of sherry or port.

Diana slowly climbs the stairs to the first floor. From the landing she scans the openings to each of the three bedrooms before she steps towards her own and pauses in the doorway. The evening light shifted during her short time in the kitchen and her walk up the stairs, and orange turns to gold as the setting sun illuminates the room's deep yellow velvet draperies, making them stand out in sharp relief against the reds, umbers, and browns of the ridiculously expensive Aubusson rug Heinrich purchased last year. Initially annoyed by his extravagance, she again concedes her husband has impeccable taste. While there is nothing of her taste within their house, as Heinrich makes every decision and sees to each minute detail, she can't deny its beauty.

She runs a finger across the back of a silk brocade slipper chair of the brightest yellow stripes contrasting the softest, first-blush-of-dawn pink, and she crosses to their dressing rooms. Diana slides off her heels and feels the pleasure of her feet flattening and expanding upon the wood floor. Her toes are sore from the long day. From two weeks of long days. Funny how she hasn't noticed the pain and pressure until now—once she's made it to the end.

It is truly going to be a once-in-a-lifetime show. One so meaningful it may launch her to Richard's job. Perhaps not the Tate's directorship. Richard is still fairly young and well respected, but Pullman at the National Gallery is nearing retirement and Stanholp at the Royal Academy has gone sideways with his board. Or the new British Museum, the crowning glory

of them all, as the papers recently reported, is due to open in only a few short months. Yes, maybe a directorship there. After all, this exhibition will put her name on everyone's lips—her worth proven, her bona fides assured, her promotion, at any top institution, a foregone conclusion.

Diana pulls off her ruined silk stockings and drops them into the bin. She then unlatches her gold belt and slides her Halston dress over her head. The ultra suede feels and looks like silk pudding in her hands. It's a new fabric, only this season making real inroads into fashion, and it is the freshest lilac color. After draping it across the chair in the dressing room's corner, she pulls on a shift dress of such quality Egyptian cotton that it, too, feels like silk. Leaving her feet bare, she pulls the pins from her chignon and ambles out of her bedroom back towards the stairs.

She ascends each step slowly. Is this truly the direction she wants to go? After six steps, well before the turn halfway, Wagner's dark, pounding notes fall upon her. She can't discern which opera has captured Heinrich's mood this evening, and she doesn't care. She turns and descends once more, heading towards the kitchen for her cheese, apples, and perhaps a glass of Château Margaux. She is in no mood to have her buoyancy dampened by Wagner, or by her husband, who only listens to the composer's most overdramatic operas when in such a state himself.

Warm and comfortable in the kitchen once more, with the glow of that singular candle, Diana opens that bottle of Château Margaux she craves.

"May I have a glass?"

She spins towards the kitchen door, hand to her heart. "You surprised me."

Though Heinrich is over thirty years her senior, Diana still marvels at his ability to move with catlike dexterity. Only the slight sloping of his shoulders reveals the march of time, but that is only noticeable when he's not painting. And Heinrich is always painting.

“Did you not know I was home?” He overarticulates each word, imbuing them with a seemingly innocent curiosity.

Diana twists back to the cupboard to retrieve another glass. Heinrich will know by her eyes if ever she offers a lie. “I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t gone up yet and was going to search the house after I poured this.”

She turns back and watches his gaze travel from her bare feet to the collar of her white shift dress. “Yes,” is all he says.

“Opening day is tomorrow.” Diana pours him a glass, slides it towards him, then drinks deeply from her own. “It’s a triumph, Heinrich. After all my work, all these years . . .”

She pops another cheese cube into her mouth and purses her lips. The contrast and interplay is unexpected; the wine brings out flavors she didn’t notice in her first several bites. A very different experience than with the apple. “It’s going to be perfect, and it’s mine . . . Everything I’ve ever wanted.” She lifts her glass towards the kitchen door into the darkened house beyond. “I was even thinking I might take up painting again after this. It’s been on my mind and I’ve gotten so far in my career. Perhaps—”

She stops as Heinrich tilts his head. The motion, the expression, and the quick sharpening then widening of his eyes tells her he has other plans, or at least that hers do not please him. *Will he tell me?*

Diana steps towards her husband. “You’re thinking something.” She pitches her voice light and playful, knowing those are the tones he responds to best. “What is it, darling?”

“Nothing.” He continues to hold her gaze. He smiles, but it’s small and tight, barely reaching the corners of his mouth, and it misses his eyes completely. “I’m simply happy for you. Let’s not take on tomorrow until it comes.”

CHAPTER 3

Lily

TUESDAY, 24 APRIL

We did it!

It's an exclamation moment, a bright moment—that rare moment when everything you've wanted has happened and everything you want to happen is so close you can almost touch it. It's wonder and giddy excitement, tempered by a startling satisfaction that it's not so unbelievable after all. We've worked for this. I've worked for this.

I reach for my tote bag, resting beside my desk, and dig out the new Salvatore Ferragamo shoes within. A pair of the “kitten heels” splashed across *Vogue* this spring, with that iconic Ferragamo bow to give them an extra dash of class. I saved them for today, only trying them on and crossing my room on the carpeted floor to avoid scuffing the soles.

I shouldn't have splurged on them. I shouldn't have splurged on the dress either—a demure beige-on-cream Thea Porter knock-off, but still expensive—especially as I didn't even wear it. Yet despite the change in dress, the shoes are still perfection.

My dress, however, worries me a bit. Diana requested neutral colors, a dress that would highlight rather than conflict with Picasso's strong use of color. The dress I had to wear today, made from a copy of Emilio Pucci's crazy and chaotic patterned fabrics, is about as far from that as possible. On any other day, I'd love it. I adore color and how bold tones play against my

pale skin and cinnamon-colored hair. But Diana was clear about today. Pale, demure, and subtle.

I stand, smooth a few wrinkles down the dress's skirt, roll back my shoulders, and accept there's no turning back. It's time.

I stride from my office down the corridor. Rather than take the side passageway that leads directly to the row of small galleries along the north wall, I pivot and take the slightly longer route through the public spaces, specifically through the Tate Gallery's rotunda—my favorite spot in the world.

The exhibition opened minutes ago, so I have only the briefest moment to glance up, absorb, and savor the bright sunshine through the rotunda's glass ceiling. I catch that magical scent of paint, art, paper, must, wood, and history before I race on, which proves challenging in tiny heels and slick leather soles on the polished marble.

Before I turn into the room, I hear the room. Inhalations of wonder, the clinking of crystal, the soft laughter that accompanies art and aristocracy all tell me it is proceeding just as we planned. Diana charged me with being her set of loyal ears at the opening today, listening and unobtrusive. After all, she wants to know what everyone says, what they think, and what benefits she may accrue from the exhibit's success. We both do.

Her voice drifts above the melodic thrum. I hear her lilting cadence, her posh accent, the thread of pride and delight dancing in her words. My smile broadens. Again—*we did it!*

I step inside and swipe a flute of champagne from Dillon's tray. His eyes widen and his lips part in surprise. On any other day I'd concede my behavior is shocking. Not today. This exhibit is as much my triumph as it is Diana's. We did this together. We pulled off the impossible: a highly personal, highly curated farewell to the twentieth century's greatest and most famous artist—within a fortnight of his death.

I throw Dillon a smile, and rather than explain anything to him, I walk on as I lift the crystal flute and let the bubbles tickle my nose. It's not that I haven't sipped champagne before; it's just that I haven't sipped it often. People who pull the corks on

bottles all the time feel no wonder in it. They don't stop and watch the bubbles rise. They don't savor their first sip and let their eyes drift closed as they concentrate on the sensation and the flavors. They walk, they talk, and they throw back mini gulps as if it's nothing more than fizz from a Coca-Cola tantalizing their senses.

Not me. I relish the experience and let the sharp, dry taste spread across my tongue before I swallow it. Circling the room's perimeter, I note each guest in attendance. Everyone accepted Diana's invitation. And by their expressions, we have wowed them. Lady Alexandra Bessing, last living daughter of Sir Jonathan Brookings, glows. I'm glad because that wasn't the case last week when I informed her we could *not* accept her proffered Picasso. Diana felt her 1923 work was not important enough within Picasso's oeuvre nor personal enough to his life and journey to feature within this commemoration. Even though the rejection was delivered with compliments and concessions, Lady Alexandra kicked up a mighty fuss.

Mr. Edward Davies, a scion of British manufacturing, laughs loudly just to my right, as well he should. Diana, despite feeling much the same about his offered work, was overruled. I gather he hopes to sell his Picasso and Richard promised to exhibit it here to drum up publicity. Davies's *Woman Laughing* hangs on the east wall.

I glance to Director Browning. Richard is laughing and looks well chuffed. I feel a sigh, long held, release within me. Though he gave his permission, tempted by the glory of this show's success, he withheld his full approval by pronouncing that such haste could be deemed poor taste. Yet his full laugh and the backslap he delivers to Mr. Davies reveals he isn't above taking credit for this "intimate moment," this exclusive farewell from Picasso's adoring elite and friends.

With my first circle of the room complete, I start again. It's time to take in the art. Since we first devised this exhibition, I've thought of nothing but these seventeen paintings. I've worked

with museums across the world organizing their transport, I've sent cables and telexes to secure insurance coverage, and I've organized the printer, the caterer, the rental company, the invitations, the . . . everything. Yes, I've worked twelve-hour-long days overseeing every minute detail for this morning, and I've anticipated taking in the installation as it's meant to be viewed.

I catch Diana's eye as I start my second tour of the room. Something flickers within her glance, and I know it's my dress. It certainly defies her call for demure delicacy, and I make a mental note to explain—and apologize—later.

For now I take another sip of my champagne and begin at the beginning . . .

PABLO PICASSO

25 October 1881–8 April 1973

The Old Guitarist, 1903

Oil on Panel

On loan, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

While Diana eschewed Picasso's most famous works, the ones made into the posters and prints that grace every office and schoolroom, she wanted this one to open our show. It's the iconic work of his Blue Period, but also a very personal work. Picasso painted it just as he emerged from a year of poverty and pain, still struggling to make ends meet and wrestling with the death of his close friend Carles Casagemas. *The Old Guitarist* embodies Picasso's trials as the man arches over and strums his large guitar with almost skeletal fingers. There's an intimacy to the work, as if Picasso himself invites the viewer into his heart. His trials become ours.

The Old Guitarist is also one of the great artist's only works that so clearly pays homage to another—in this case, the famous Greek painter El Greco. That, in and of itself, is a peek into Picasso's heart. Yes, it is truly a masterpiece and, at thirty-two by forty-eight inches, one of the largest paintings in our show.

Next to the huge and iconic *The Old Guitarist*, Diana instructed the installation team to hang a series of sketches. It was a brilliant decision. After such an impressive beginning, the exhibition instantly turns more personal. It's almost as if the viewer can discern Picasso's choices, witness his process, and share in his emotions.

I take in each sketch and step into Picasso's love life, for each is a drawing of a woman in varying states of dishabille. Knowing Picasso, and I feel I do now, I sense what he felt for each as a lover or what he felt for the woman he hoped would soon become one.

As I walk on, some of the works feel like old friends. Some I am truly meeting for the first time. My pulse quickens with one here, slows with another there. My gaze sweeps to the painting Edward Davies and Director Browning bullied Diana into accepting for the exhibit just two days ago. *Woman Laughing*, 1930.

Diana was furious, but I'm not sure why. The painting fits in size, structure, and subject matter. I pause. Is this woman Dora Maar or Olga Khokhlova? Picasso loved both in 1930. And this woman is interesting, she's dynamic, she's . . .

I tilt my head to study her better. In form, *Woman Laughing* is a perfect execution of Picasso's surrealist period. But something feels off. I take a sip of my champagne and move on. The next offering, *Bullfight*, 1934, is also stun—

I gulp and choke, straining to control the spasms in my throat. Champagne sticks to my tongue and cloy. Sticky and sweet. Warm and wrong. I cough again and turn.

A few steps back and I again examine *Woman in an Armchair*, 1929. Diana instructed the installation team to hang this one right before *Woman Laughing*. It's the shocking two-dimensional portrayal of Picasso's wife, Olga Khokhlova, just as their relationship was warping, disintegrating, and ending. That means the more peaceful *Woman Laughing* can't be Olga. His emotions towards her had already soured.

I step forward and study *Woman Laughing* again, painted just a year later. I see the development of Picasso's style, his comfort in

the midst of the grotesque and frenzied, and yet . . . I look beyond it to *Bullfight*, painted a few years after that.

I clamp my hand over my mouth, shocked at the obvious truth before me as I center myself before *Woman Laughing* once more. I can't pull my eyes from it. My mind reels. Then, unable to think, hold back, or move forward, I call out, "That's a forgery."

The world around me stops.



CHAPTER 4

Time froze. Nothing moved. No breath. No air. Then a singular whisper struck me. “*Get out. You’re finished.*”

Director Browning’s tight words from an hour ago fill my head once more, and my stomach drops as I wait in Diana’s office. How many times can I feel this sensation anew? This flopping despair at the bottom of me? In my years working here, I have never seen Richard—Director Browning—turn such a color.

Forget the quick flush of carmine that accompanies any face suffused with blood and anger. He has sported that hue on plenty of occasions—when the installation team let Claes Oldenburg’s sculpture *Soft Drainpipe-Blue* drop in a crumpled heap of fabric onto the cement floor just after the Gallery purchased it for an obscene amount a couple years ago. Or better yet, when my friend Sara in Donor Relations seated Ian Campbell, the eleventh Duke of Argyll, beside his ex-wife, Margaret Whigham, last year at a donor luncheon. Sara didn’t know about the scandalous 1963 divorce, nor did she check her guest list with anyone in the Gallery. The pop of the first champagne cork released more than bubbly that noon.

No, as bad as all that was, this morning I pushed Richard’s florid face past the entire red spectrum as if I’d personally added drops of violet or Prussian blue to his very veins. He was going to either unleash his fury, with lords and ladies looking on, or burst a blood vessel trying to keep it locked tight.

I didn’t wait to find out. At his “*Get out,*” I was already fleeing. His “*You’re finished*” figuratively kicked me from behind.

Unfortunately, the magnitude of what I'd done hit the instant *after* I'd done it. After Richard and Mr. Davies, standing close by, overheard me. After *The Times* reporter, chatting with them, widened his eyes with interest. After everything grew so still I could actually hear those tiny bubbles pop within my champagne.

Diana grabbed my arm as I flew by. So hard, in fact, the force of her grip swung me around and my shoulder hit the doorframe while my slick leather soles slid from beneath me. These stupid heels almost brought us both crashing down.

She stood her ground, however, in a pair of heels twice the height of mine. She righted me and, in a whisper much softer than Richard's but equally commanding, said, "Go to my office. Do. Not. Leave."

I drop my head into my hands, wishing I was home, burrowed under my covers, rather than sitting in Diana's office. A sharp sting shifts my focus to my index finger. I've shredded another cuticle, and this one now bleeds. I glance around in search of a tissue.

I truly do love this room's refinement and luxury, and I find comfort in it. It's how I'd decorate my ideal space if I could. But I can't. While I hoped such a room could someday be mine, today's outburst is an apt reminder why it can't.

This room is unique; it's an extension of the woman herself, from the desk to the five small Renoir sketches on the wall to the left, to the Miro, Chagall, and three prints from Picasso's *Vollard Suite* she loves so much, hanging to the right. It's perfection—perfection born of generational taste and experience, born of education and acumen, born of knowing what to say and knowing how to keep your mouth shut when required.

Oh my . . . I messed up. Irrevocably. Again.

"What were you thinking?"

I startle and spin towards the door. My mind goes blank. Diana stands stiff and pale, almost as if she's materialized from cloud and shadow rather than walked through the door like a normal person. Absent the flickering muscle along her jawline just below her gold drop earring, one might place her in the South Gallery along with the rest of the marble women.

She doesn't speak or move as several thoughts race through my head. I open my mouth to offer an explanation along with my apology, but no words emerge. I close my mouth and open it again with the realization of what I can't admit: I wasn't thinking. Basking in the best morning of my life and the extraordinary feat we'd accomplished, I simply noted something that marred that perfection. Something that didn't belong. And I blurted it out.

I can't tell Diana this because then I'd have to tell her what truly led to my soaring buoyancy this morning. I'd have to confess that I don't belong in her world, and that I try each and every day not to mess up and reveal all I don't know and don't understand. Then I'd have to confess that this morning, for one brief, shining moment, I believed I'd actually earned my spot in that room, that I'd arrived and could be an equal, her equal. I'd have to admit that because I'd taken charge of so many aspects of this exhibition, it became my own and I grew so excited, so sure of myself, and so hopeful of what it could mean for me that I no longer worried about not belonging or messing up.

So that's exactly what I did.

I forgot everything. I forgot my place. I forgot my reality. I am not a guest at the party. I observe the party. I take notes. I make lists. I get the job done. I do not take sips of swiped champagne. I don't make plans; I execute my boss's plans. And I certainly never blurt my opinions.

"Lily." Diana snaps her fingers in front of my nose. I pull back at the flick of displaced air. The glow from the window frames her golden hair in a fierce goddess-like halo. She steps to the side and the halo disappears. She turns mortal once more.

"I just saw it. I saw— I don't know what I saw," I stammer and drop my gaze. I feel small, ashamed, like a child caught in a lie. I feel unsure and lost. I lift my head. I'm not a child and I am not lost. With a deep breath, I try to articulate what happened. If I can get it out, say it clearly, perhaps she'll understand. Perhaps *I'll* understand.

"I just looked at the painting and it struck me." My hands

reach out in a plaintive gesture like I'm begging. It doesn't look or feel professional. I drop them and try again, in a lower tone this time. "You must have noticed it too, right? You're an expert in all the modernist painters."

Her face clouds and I realize that including her in my madness is just that, madness. Diana is keeper of the Tate's Modern Collections and I am her assistant—I do not tell her what she *must* have noticed. "I'm sorry. I just saw it and blurted it out. I truly am very sor—"

"You just *saw* it? You're *sorry*?" She cuts me off with clipped words and sharp gestures, and her patronizing tone coats each word in incredulous exasperation. I again feel stupid and young. She keeps talking as she circles her desk to her chair.

"You *saw* a forged Picasso in a second's examination? A forgery a top dealer in Paris missed, then sold? And you announced it? With *The Times* there to report the whole thing?" She stands in front of her seat, palms pressed flat to her desk. "You called Mr. Davies a fraud. You implied I'm a fraud. It's my show. I'm finished."

I cringe at her ominous "finished" and hold up my hand in panic. "That reporter can't write about it. I didn't mean to say it. I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't, and of course he's going to write about it. You just handed him a front-page scandal. Didn't you see the article when Davies purchased that piece? He bought it the day after Picasso's death for an extraordinary sum. It garnered unprecedented attention, and now you've given the press a follow-up."

Diana drops into her desk chair, a wood-and-leather mid-century accountant's chair that bounces a touch as she sits. Her usually sky-blue eyes are stormy and I feel their chill. As I suspect she's waiting for me to say more, I open my mouth to apologize again, but she cuts me off as soon as I draw breath.

"You ruined my show, Lily."

Her show. I wilt further, if that's even possible. It is hers. It was never ours. And it was certainly never mine.

“You humiliated Mr. Davies and the Tate, and you denigrated Picasso’s memory. This was to be a world-class tribute, not the launch of a kind of scandal that destroys artists and wrecks careers.”

She raises her hand to stop me from speaking. “Everything I’ve spent my life working towards is gone. With funds tight across the arts community, who will feel their support is safe here in my hands?”

I try to pay attention to the litany of troubles I created for her but don’t hear much after she said the ensuing scandal could destroy an artist. “Could what I said really destroy Picasso?”

“A lesser artist would be ruined, yes.” Her eyes slide closed. “Picasso will survive. I may not.”

“I didn’t mean to do it,” I whisper.

Her eyes open and they’ve taken on a sheen of vulnerability I’ve rarely seen within her. Without thinking, I lean forward as she touches the back of her hand beneath her nose as if unshed tears are pricking it as well.

Andrew, the head of the installation team, calls Diana the “White Witch” after that character from Lewis’s Narnia. He says she’s stone-cold and ruthless. While I laugh with him, because it’s best not to make enemies around here, I don’t agree. I’ve never found Diana cold and certainly never ruthless. She’s simply restrained, determined, and passionate about a job well done. She’s needed those attributes to rise as high as she has, and I respect that. Vulnerability and fear are not emotional states I associate with her. Yet she now pulsates with them. I’ve brought them to her.

“You humiliated me, Lily. Did you see what happened in there? Did you hear them?”

Diana wants a directorship, and why shouldn’t she? There’s never been a woman at the helm. Not here, not anywhere in England or across Europe, and she has a shot. She *had* a shot—especially with the donors she’s brought in lately.

Unless they all leave. Because of me.

I frantically cast for anything I can say or do to fix this, but every thought ends with the futile reality that nothing can be

done. I have truly and irrevocably messed up. Tears sting my eyes and I command them not to fall. "I'm sorry. I should've—"

"Stop. If you've got nothing better than another tepid apology to offer, stop." Her eyes slide shut once more and her hand, gold bracelets clattering down the tight sleeve of her beige silk dress, raises towards me with its palm facing out. "It is a Picasso, Lily. That makes the stakes high. The highest."

Her voice sounds drained of all life and my name thuds on the downbeat as if a lily is a very pedestrian flower, making me a very pedestrian girl. I smooth my hand down my dress's skirt, flattening the wrinkles in my lap. I try to straighten my spine, willing myself to believe that if given a chance, I can make things right somehow. I shrink under the weight that I can't.

Diana opens her eyes and all vulnerability is gone. They spark more ice than storm, and her complexion pales a degree closer to ash. "You set off a bomb in there."

She blinks and I flinch. After last month's IRA bombing at the Old Bailey, such words cannot be used carelessly. She clears her throat to reset our attention. "We have to end this somehow, Lily. *Woman Laughing* is a genuine Picasso. It is not a forgery."

She glares at me. Her head rests on splayed fingertips gripping her temples, elbows on her desk. I notice the small lines in her forehead, the crease in the center of her brow, and the tight purse of her lips. Unlike before when trying to calm her temper, I sense she's now trying to rewind the clock or divine a solution. By her expression I gather she can't find a way out either.

"Regardless of its authenticity, however, we have the issue that your comment will live in the collective memory. Art is not a fixed commodity. Some of its value is and always will be sentimental. That makes it mercurial. You indelibly stained *Woman Laughing*. Then there's Director Browning."

My stomach lurches up towards my heart this time and my throat constricts. I now suspect his "*You're finished*" did not merely refer to my presence at the show's opening.

Diana stares at me so long I shift in my seat. My lower thigh

sticks and pulls on the leather. The hem on this dress is too short. I yank at the skirt. I stop. I swipe my hand across my neck. Despite the coolness of the room, I'm damp, overheated, and sticky. I finally can't take her stare or the silence any longer. "What do you mean?"

"He wants you to empty your desk and leave."

"I'm fired? No— He can't—" I stretch forward and reach a hand towards the edge of Diana's desk. Her eyes track it. I drop my hand into my lap and start pulling at my dress's hem again. "I'll apologize to him and to Mr. Davies right now. I'll explain that I didn't know what I was saying. No one should listen to me. I—"

"Stop, Lily." The same word. The same raised hand. This time it's her right hand and the large ring she wears on her middle finger has twisted to her palm. The gold double-sided face of Janus snags my attention. The god of passages, transitions, duality, and doorways. The god of beginnings. And unfortunately for me, the god of endings.

As Diana drops her hand, her thumb reflexively twists the ring to its proper position. "Richard rushed Mr. Davies into his office as I came here. I assume they'll call Scotland Yard."

"There's no need." The words come out too fast, too panicked. I see everything I've worked for slip away.

"Forgery is fraud, Lily. A crime. What about this do you not understand?" Her voice rises a notch and I duck lower.

"Can't I just take it back?" The words are out of my mouth without thought, and they hit me so hard I almost heave up this morning's tea and toast. I said those same words once long ago, yet it feels like yesterday. And no, whatever one says or does cannot be taken back. Some things can never be taken back.

My eyes flood with tears, and I can no longer keep them from spilling over. Not because of this morning, the painting, or getting fired. I swipe at them and, sitting here in my Emilio Pucci knock-off dress, I am no longer twenty-seven. I am five and I am a silly little girl playing dress-up—a silly little girl who thought she could join a party she wasn't invited to. A silly little girl who lashed out

and messed up so badly, life could never be the same again. A silly little girl who asked her older sister if she could just “take it back” and the silly little girl who shrank deep within herself when told she never could, not in a million lifetimes.

I’m still that girl and now, twenty-two years later, I have ruined everything again.

“Lily?”

I look up to find Diana’s chair empty. It takes me a second to shift my perspective and locate her. She has come from behind her desk and stands beside me. My eyes hit her waist. She’s wearing another of those lovely Halston gold chain-link belts I so admire. This one is thinner and more delicate than yesterday’s.

“Go home.”

I shake my head and push the words out in a whisper. I don’t have enough air for more. “Please. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“You need to leave before Mr. Davies and Richard come out of his office. Don’t clear your desk. Just go.” She steps back and opens her door.

“Don’t clear my desk?” My head and hopes lift.

“We’ll talk about your job later. For now, just leave.”

With a single nod and no words, I obey. I flee her office as fast as I fled the exhibition. Upon reaching the corridor, I glance to the left and find Director Browning’s office door still shut. I turn right and walk as quickly and quietly as my stupid heels tapping on the wood floor will allow.

At the end of the corridor, I push open my office door and grab my handbag from next to my desk. I wrench off the ridiculous shoes and slide into my everyday steady loafers. I look across my desk. There’s a picture of my nieces sitting on one corner and a ceramic mug I made in Year One next to it. There’s also a copy of today’s lovely exhibition catalogue and the card of Picasso’s *Child with a Dove*, from that bonkers bird-launching birthday party, propped against my desk lamp. I open my bag and reach for the card first, then pull back just as my fingers brush its edge. Diana said to leave everything behind.

I’m coming back. I must come back.

I step quietly outside my office, intending to take the nearby door to the basement, when a shout stops me.

“You!”

I slowly spin to meet a red-faced, stocky man standing wide-stance and arms crossed only two meters away. I have never spoken directly to Mr. Davies, but I’ve seen him in the Gallery. His steel-grey hair, combed back and smooth, reminds me of the steel factories and manufacturing for which he’s famous. I’ve heard his voice too. It’s strong and commanding. My first impression was that this man was determined, blustery, and aggressive. Today I find him terrifying.

He strides forward, full steam, and stops a mere whisper from my face. I work hard not to flinch, so sure he’s about to crash into me.

“How dare you!”

“I’m sorry— I—” I lift a supplicating hand in the tight space between us.

His voice drops low, heat emanating from him. “You called me a chancer in there. A cheat. A liar. Your stunt will be splashed across the papers tomorrow and will follow *Woman Laughing* forever. It will follow me forever.”

“I’m sor—”

“You cost me the half million pounds I’d have made on the sale of that painting. Not to mention the loss of the almost half million pounds I paid for it. I’ll not pay in flesh or pounds for what you did in there. You will.” He stares down at me, and the thin skin beneath his left eye quivers. “The Tate will.”

“It wasn’t the Tate’s fault. No one . . .” I run out of words. I run out of thought. I take a step back.

Just as I do, Mr. Davies shifts as well. He looks down to my stumbling feet and a startle passes through his gaze, quick as lightning. It feels as if he sees the incongruity of this moment— why should the lion even bother to confront the mouse?

He jerks his head, chin thrusting forward, as if to say, “Be gone.”

Again, I obey.

I open the door from the stairwell into the basement and stall as my eyes adjust to the dim light. Accounting, Development, Services and Maintenance, along with a few other offices, are housed here. No one needs to see those departments. In fact, it's better if no one does—art and its display are to appear effortless and ephemeral. No one wants to shine a light on the nuts and bolts required to run this place. But in reality, the nuts and bolts matter most.

It's quiet and cool, and my breath releases. I peek into the offices as I pass, and a few colleagues glance up and acknowledge me with either a nod or a smile. As there are no wide eyes or pitying looks, I suspect the gossip hasn't reached here yet, and I pray I can push through the service entrance door at the back of the Gallery before it does.

“Lily?”

I turn at Becca's call and poke my head through her cracked doorway. “Hallo.” I pitch my voice high. “I can't talk right now. I just dropped down to grab something.”

My friend smiles. “Is it beautiful? I'm going to walk through before I head home. Will you give me a guided tour?”

“Wish I could.” I wave a hand as if that's all I have time for. “Diana has me off running an errand. They're headed into the luncheon soon.”

I hate lying to Becca. I hate how easily I do it. But I don't trust myself right now with the truth—a truth I want to change if I can. And I have to get out of here. I flap my hand again. “See you tomorrow?”

Without waiting for her reply, I duck from her doorway and push at the service entrance door—and I stop.

Shaking my head at the stupidity of this impulsive idea, I turn left and head down the corridor to another set of stairs. A glance at my watch confirms the guests have, in fact, moved into the next room and should be seated at the luncheon. Diana even requested that the doors be shut in order to give the party greater intimacy.

That means no one will be in the Picasso exhibition right now. That means no one will see me in it either.

I can sneak into the room and see *Woman Laughing* once more and suss out what I saw—what I *thought* I saw—and then I can explain it better. I can fix this.

The stairs bring me into the rotunda and my steps slow only long enough to soothe my soul a tiny bit. I cross to the row of rooms beyond, my low-heeled loafers making their familiar deep strikes against the marble as I head to the small gallery housing the Picasso commemoration. Rather than merely empty, however, the room is closed with a gate and a guard.

“Why are you here? Are the guests in the luncheon?” I ask Archie, who shifts his weight from one stationary foot to the other.

“The luncheon was canceled. They’ve all gone ’ome.”

“Gone? Why?”

He stares at me. “Everyone fled, Lily. It looked like someone yelled *fire* or like that time back when I worked at the Natural History Museum and someone cracked open the vents to the decaying bug room. That stench cleared the museum in five minutes flat.” He dips his head at me. “This clearing was a mite bit faster.”

“But it was only a comment. How could everyone leave?”

“Words are powerful things.” The sharp aspect of concentration in Archie’s eyes is replaced by the softer shape of affection and pity. “You’re in a heap of trouble. I’ve never seen the likes of Mr. Browning a li’l while ago. He hauled me out of the lobby and told me not to leave this post ’til closing.”

“But your back—” I take in how Archie is standing, stiff and leaning forward ever so slightly. I note the tight press of his mouth and the pronounced line in the center of his forehead. “You must hate me. Your back already hurts, doesn’t it?”

Archie is in his late sixties with a back wounded in the last war. He’s earned his comfortable chair at the lobby front desk, glancing into overstuffed bags and placing wet brollies into a bucket.

“Get on with you.” His tight smile transforms into a genuine grin. “Don’t you be worrying about my back.” He looks above

and beyond me as if searching for threats. “And don’t be getting caught ’round here either.”

“Can I sneak in? Just for a moment?”

Archie’s eyes widen and his whole forehead wrinkles with surprise and alarm, and I’m instantly ashamed I requested such a thing. I pull back, trying to distance myself from the words still floating between us. “I didn’t ask that. I’m leaving.” My hand drops upon his arm. It’s an apology, another one, and I can tell by his soft smile and long, slow blink that he understands.

I make my way to the Gallery’s side entrance. Although it’s a public one, it’s also the closest to me right now. Archie is correct. I can’t be caught ’round here a moment more.

I scan the program posters and exhibition announcements in the entryway just outside the cloakroom, searching for the one that launched my high-flying fortnight straight into the stratosphere.

BRITISH EMERGING
ARTISTS EXHIBITION

Tate Gallery—Serpentine Gallery,
Kensington Gardens

1–29 June 1973

I close my eyes. It’s amazing how something I believed impossible became possible and so tantalizingly within my reach within two short weeks and by one simple comment.

One comment that sent me soaring.

Soaring so high, a crash was the only way down.