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Tel était le Paris de notre jeunesse, au temps où nous étions très pauvres et très heureux.
But this is how Paris was in the early days, when we were very poor and very happy.
--Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

The Luxembourg Gardens

Paris in spring, when a young person's fancy turns to thoughts of love. In Jared's case, *love* could mean many things – his studio, his art, the new brushes he bought yesterday when Sandy unexpectedly gave him some francs, the flowers blooming in the street below his windows, Christian's chicken-in-the-pot, the soft blue sky outside, the cabaret where Sandy and Genevieve danced, the sound of French drifting up from the street and through the floor, the entirety of Montmartre, the really excellent sex he'd had last night which had led to some really good sleep, and his boyfriend Jensen, who was... not there.

Jared shoved the duvet over to the empty side of the bed, swung his legs off the mattress, and stood. He stretched. The studio was full of indirect morning light – the windows faced south and west, more or less, so he and Jensen got some really glorious sun in the afternoons, but the morning light was a bit more diffuse. He could see dust motes floating in the air, and paintings leaning against the walls in shadow. It really was beautiful.

There was a note on the table, scribbled on a scrap of paper that Jensen had probably ripped out of his notebook:

You looked so peaceful I didn't want to wake you. See you tonight.

That meant *Come by Christian's café for dinner and he'll feed you*, which Jared was more than happy to do. Christian was a good cook, he poured decent wine, and he'd known Jensen since they were kids and felt a kind of obligation to feed his old friend and his old friend's bottomless pit of a painter boyfriend. He'd give Jared and Jensen a hard time about floating them credit, he'd refuse to take a

painting in payment, and he'd eventually dish something up and serve them.

If there was one thing Jared would change about being in Paris, it was that he'd like to actually sell some paintings and make some money. He didn't like having to scrounge off his friends.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't do it. A boy had to eat, after all. And he was only twenty-three – he could still be growing.

He wondered where Jensen had gone. Maybe he'd found a sidewalk table at a little café or a patisserie along the Rue Lepic or the wider Boulevard de Clichy or any of the narrow side streets in Montmartre, for a coffee and a croissant and a first-row seat to the goings-on in their corner of Paris. Or maybe he was sitting inside, listening to morning chatter and trying to write. He hadn't sold any stories yet, and it was hard to get an English-language play produced in France. He was currently working on a series of stories and vignettes about Paris, including a few tales about a young poet and the love of his life, both characters thinly disguised versions of himself and Jared. (Or more well disguised versions, as the poet's love was a pretty French girl who made lace, rather than a tall boy from Texas who liked to paint.) There was no shortage of story fodder in their neighborhood, that was for sure.

They lived in a studio on the top floor of an old converted factory. It hung off the slope of the hill, the old factory windows unobstructed by trees and thus a conduit for the inescapable noise of their neighbors and the smells of lilac and hawthorne and baking bread. It was an old, flimsy building, the walls thin enough that Jared and Jensen could hear the girl who lived below them, and the two American brothers next door. Edwin was a composer and musician, and he'd hung blankets over his walls to try and improve the acoustics and coincidentally deaden the noise from Jared and Jensen's studio.

Jared hadn't thought they were that loud – they certainly tried to be mindful of the fact that they had close neighbors – but sometimes they got so excited that they'd knock the bedframe against the wall, and he imagined that could be annoying and distracting. And no one needed to hear him and Jensen having sex.

There was a sign on their door that said, in English and French, "Please knock. We might be naked." It had been nailed there last autumn when one of their building neighbors, a painter and illustrator named Sebastian, had waltzed in to borrow something - the door had been unlocked - and interrupted Jared and Jensen fucking on the sofa. "If I'd known there was going to be a free show I would've invited some friends," he'd commented drily. Jensen was mortified (much more than Sebastian was) and the next day the sign appeared on their door.

A couple of months later Sebastian moved out and shifted his stuff to a new studio on the Boulevard de Clichy, but the sign remained.

On the first of the month, like clockwork, the landlady's grand-niece Marion came by to collect the rent. Sometimes, when they didn't have the money – and a lot of times they didn't have the money – she'd accept a painting instead. The building creaked and leaked and the windows rattled in the least wind, but it was cheap and the light was good and Jared liked being able to go out into the tiny plaza in front of the old factory and look up to the top of the butte – the "mont" of Montmartre – and see the white basilica of Sacré-Coeur rising over the city. He liked being able to look out the drafty many-paned windows of his studio and see the roofs of the houses marching down the hill, the occasional windmill with its still blades stretching into the air.

Compared to the rest of Paris, with its orderly boulevards and stately buildings and formal gardens, Montmartre looked like the village it still partly was – uneven streets winding up the butte, cheap cafés, rowdy bars, lilac and wild roses clinging to the crooked wooden buildings, painters and prostitutes and butchers and bakers and laundresses and cats and the occasional cow. It was a wild place, in the way of old neighborhoods reluctantly nestled hard against a more civilized city. Montmartre rolled down the butte, met the rest of Paris, and flowed across the Seine, the whole a busier and more crowded and more exciting city than the one Jared had left.

He was Texan, and he'd always be Texan, and someday he figured he'd go home. But until then, he was young and broke and living in Paris with the man he loved, and he was going to enjoy it.

Today that meant taking advantage of the light and hauling his paintbox and easel to the Jardin du Luxembourg. There should be a puppet show today, which meant crowds to paint if nothing else. It was a glorious day and he wanted to be out in it. He pulled on some clothes, packed his things, dug up a handful of coins in case he needed to buy something, and went.

He ran into Danneel, his American nanny friend, in the gardens, where she had taken her charge Baby B to watch the puppet show. Baby B was apparently having none of it, and Danneel was bouncing him around the garden's formal paths in his wicker baby carriage when Jared found her.

He was in such a good mood he kissed her hello, on both cheeks in the French fashion, even though she'd once told him that wasn't really the proper thing to do with a member of someone's household staff. Now she just laughed.

"You must be having a good day," she said. "We came to see the puppet show but the little Monsieur had other ideas." She wiggled her fingers under the hood of the baby carriage, letting Baby B know that she was talking about him. Jared peered into the carriage. The baby looked calmly back at him.

"He's quiet now."

"You should've heard the squalling before." She pushed the carriage along the path. "Come on, walk with me. I have an hour still. What did you paint?"

"Crowds. Trees. Shrubbery." He'd sketched, mostly, feeling too overcome by the weather to do much more than make vague marks on his canvas. He'd probably end up painting over everything anyway.

"I would've thought you'd be in the Bois de Boulogne." That was where they usually ran into each other, and was in fact where Jared finally talked to her in the first place, having seen her several times and having heard her speaking to Baby B in American-accented English. He and Jensen had been in Paris ten months now, and his French was still embarrassing. Jensen did a lot of translating.

"Tomorrow, probably. I was hoping you'd come to watch the puppet show today and I could say hi."

"Well, we tried to watch the puppet show." Danneel glanced at Baby B, who now seemed to be falling asleep. She rolled her eyes. "So hi." She grinned at Jared.

He thought about a half-finished painting back in the studio, showing her wheeling the baby carriage along a sunny path in the Bois de Boulogne. He should finish it. She was very pretty and made a good

subject. He had no idea how Baby B's parents, Danneel's employers, would feel about their child and his nanny showing up in a stranger's painting, but it wasn't as if he was ever going to meet them, and you couldn't see Baby B's face anyway. And painters made paintings of people they didn't know all the time.

"Where are you going after this?" Jared asked.

"I have to pick up some things from the cobbler and then we have to go home. Oh, I might start getting Saturday afternoons and some evenings off. I can catch up with you somewhere and meet your famous friends." Because Jared had told her about Christian and his partner Steve, and about Sandy and Genevieve, and about Edwin and Aldis, the brothers in the studio next door, and about Sebastian and some of the other people in his building, and of course he'd told her about Jensen. But she'd never met any of them. They'd like her. She'd like them. He should introduce them all.

"I don't know for sure, though," she continued, pausing to let a small herd of little boys thunder past. Baby B made a curious noise, which Jared interpreted as baby for "What the hell was that?"

"You can probably just show up," he told Danneel. "Come to the Cherokee. If we're not there, Christian can point you in the right direction. Or leave me a message ahead of time. Whatever works best."

The Cherokee was so named because Christian had once worked in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show as a sharpshooter and trick rider, alongside a group of native Cherokee and a number of white cowboys. The show had come to Paris in 1889, seven years ago, but during their 1892 tour in London, Christian was injured in an act that went wrong. He quit, cashed in his contract, and came back to Paris to open a café. The Parisians had loved Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and Christian felt some loyalty to the job that had taken him to Europe, and more importantly to the territory where he'd grown up.

There was nothing to be gained back home by claiming any kind of kinship – or any friendship – with the native tribes, but in Paris it was exotic and western, and while very few people would ever go out of their way to find a tiny café in Montmartre run by a former cowboy, to Christian it was a little piece of home, and Jared always felt comfortable there.

And more importantly, Christian would accept Jared and Jensen's mail, and it was the most reliable place to leave them a message. None of Jared's artist neighbors could be counted on for that.

Danneel paused to pull a little notebook and a pencil out of the front pocket of her apron. "Did you ever tell me where it is?" she asked.

"In Montmartre?" Jared answered. Danneel gave him a "that was a stupid answer to an honest question" eyeroll. "Here." He took her notebook and pencil, rested the notebook on top of the hood of Baby B's carriage, and wrote the address next to a quick sketch of what he hoped was a Cherokee warrior's head. His experience with Native Americans was limited.

"Am I ever going to get to see your finished paintings?" Danneel asked, after they'd walked a little more.

"If I ever find a dealer, you can convince your employers to buy one."

She chuckled. "So you haven't found one yet, huh."

"Nope." He paused to switch the hands carrying his paintbox and collapsible easel. He was used to carrying his stuff around the city, but the gardens were crowded and people occasionally jostled him, and he didn't like worrying that they were knocking into his easel. "I tried to meet with a guy last week, but it didn't work out. Part of the problem is that I don't know anyone, and no one I know knows anyone either. I think Katharine was just accepted into an exhibition - she's a sculptor, she lives below me and Jensen - but I haven't had any luck there either." He shrugged. "I know it can take time. But we have a hard time paying our rent, and we owe Christian for months of feeding us, and I'd just like to sell something. It would make me feel like I'm on the right track, you know? Like I'm doing the right thing."

Danneel patted him on the arm. "It'll happen. The stuff that I've seen looks good. I know it's not finished" - and here she gave him a meaningful look - "but it's a good start. And I know you paint more than just the gardens or the Bois. Someone will want a painting of dancing girls. Look at Toulouse-Lautrec. Or Degas. It will happen for you, I know it will."

Jensen said the exact same thing later that night at the Cherokee. But he would - he was Jared's boyfriend and offering comfort and encouragement was part of the job. In return, Jared read Jensen's latest work-in-progress and offered reassurance that it was good, because that was part of *his* job.

"We'll go to the Green Door," Jensen suggested. That was the cabaret where Sandy and Genevieve danced. "We'll see the girls and you can draw Sandy flipping her skirts over her head." He grinned. "Maybe they'll let you draw them getting dressed."

Sometimes there were distinct advantages to being a boy who liked boys. Dancing girls didn't care so much if you wanted to sketch them changing their skirts or pulling up their stockings or lacing other girls into their corsets or just lounging around their dressing room half-dressed. When you said you were a painter, they wanted to keep your sketches for themselves, which meant you just had to keep coming back to draw them some more.

That night Jared stayed out in the audience, though, drawing dancers and other patrons and Jensen smoking. Jensen kissed him during a break in the show, and his mouth tasted like wine and tobacco. Genevieve came out to say hi - Sandy was apparently mediating some kind of dancer drama backstage - and Jensen kissed her too. She just laughed. She wasn't interested in men any more than Jensen was interested in women, but even if she had been, if Jensen wanted to kiss her that was okay. Jared didn't care. They were friends and Jensen would never stray, so why should it matter?

It was late when Jared and Jensen finally went home, having drunk and danced and chatted, and Jensen fell on the bed, pulling Jared on top of him and murmuring, "Maybe I'll try my hand at erotic stories," in Jared's ear.

"Yeah?" Jared said. "You'd write about our sex life?"

"Not ours, no. It's no one's business. But men and women, sure. Sandy would tell me some things. Genevieve too. What pleases a woman, you know? I already know what pleases a man." He bit at Jared's lower lip. Jared's tongue flicked out and caught the tip of his nose, and he laughed. "Even that." His teeth closed around Jared's lip again and he squeezed Jared's ass. Jared ground down against him, rubbing until Jensen released his lip and moaned.

"You want to fuck me?" Jared murmured. "You want me to stroke your cock until you're hard enough to pound nails, and then roll onto my back and spread my legs for you? That's what I want."

Jensen laughed breathlessly and swatted the back of his head. "No fair writing my story for me."

"You write it, I'll paint it. I'll paint you in all your glory, and *that* will sell." It would be considered obscene, a painting of men fucking - and there was probably a law against selling the kinds of filthy stories Jensen could write about them - but someone would buy it. Someone would want it.

Jensen naked and beautiful and aroused - who wouldn't want him?

"You won't." Jensen's voice was suddenly serious. "Because if you do I'll never sleep with you again."

"Okay, okay. I won't. Then kiss me. And fuck me."

"No, Jared, no." Jensen wrapped his legs around Jared's waist. "You fuck me."

So Jared did. It was a bit of a struggle getting their clothes off, but soon he was spreading Jensen's thighs and sinking into his body and it was hot and close and Jared ducked his head to mouth at Jensen's throat, and he could feel Jensen's moans against his tongue.

Jared pushed deep, losing himself in the heat and the smoke-and-sweat scent of Jensen's body, moonlight and starlight from outside dimly illuminating Jensen's half-closed eyes and half-open mouth and the flutter in his throat as he tried to catch his breath. His legs tightened around Jared's waist.

Jared fucked him harder. The bed rocked underneath them as they panted and moaned and then Jared was coming, biting his lip to keep from crying out, his eyes fixed on Jensen's face.

When he was finished, he guided Jensen's hand between them, wrapped their fingers together around Jensen's cock, and stroked until Jensen came as well.

"I can't paint that," Jared panted. "How that feels. How you feel."

"Good." Jensen reached up to push Jared's hair back from his face, then tangled his fingers in it to pull Jared down for a satisfyingly deep kiss. After they pulled apart, Jared rolled off Jensen and Jensen got up to find something to sleep in. Jared watched him as he found undershorts and a nightshirt, put them on, and then threw Jared's nightclothes at the bed before joining him under the duvet.

There was a breeze through the open window, the sounds of rustling trees and a barking dog and someone singing a French song incoherently and off-key. Jared flung his arm across Jensen's chest and his leg over Jensen's thigh. He loved this city. He loved his life.



Spring in the Bois de Boulogne

Jared felt like he'd spent the entire winter and beginning of spring slouching around Montmartre, confining his painting subjects to whatever existed within a circle that was fifteen walking minutes across. Or he'd holed up in the studio, wearing gloves with the fingertips cut off and moving his easel close to the old cast-iron stove to keep warm. He was so used to painting what was nearby that he found himself thinking that maybe he'd go down to the Rue d'Amboise today and sketch the girls hanging out the windows of the brothels trying to entice the passers-by. But some of them were getting wise to him and would want to be paid like any other models, which meant for now he should go elsewhere. Because the sun was out and the weather looked fine, that "elsewhere" became the Bois de Boulogne, where Jared took his easel and paintbox and set himself up near one of the walking paths but hopefully out of people's way. After a couple of hours he hadn't seen his favorite recurring walker, a tall woman with an ocelot on a leash, but he had seen several women strolling with their friends, a gaggle of small girls in school uniforms being herded by a pair of nuns, three separate people (one maid, one manservant, and a well-dressed middle-aged lady) walking small, nervous-looking dogs, and Danneel out by herself with a net bag over her arm.

"Jared!" she called, waving at him as she came down the path. He waved back. "I was hoping to see you here."

"You found me." He grinned. "Why don't you have the baby?"

"His mother is playing with him in the garden. She sent me on some errands. Grapes, hard cheese, soft cheese, bread, flowers." She ticked them off on her fingers, then leaned around Jared to peer at his canvas. "What are we painting today?"

"Studies. Trees. Just looking at the Bois in this kind of light. Hoping to see the woman with the ocelot."

"I'm sorry?"

"Sometimes I see a woman walking an ocelot on a leash. She's always beautifully dressed, very regal. She looks like I always imagined the Queen of Sheba would look, but not as dark." He'd learned in Sunday School that Sheba was in Africa, and he knew that Africans were dark-skinned, so King Solomon's beautiful and wealthy queen had become tall and imperious and black as night in Jared's head. And who was to say she hadn't had tame ocelots in her court?

"I think I know who you're talking about." Danneel pursed her lips in thought. "I'm pretty sure Mrs B has an American friend who would fit that description. I don't know if she owns an ocelot, but if she's the woman I'm thinking about, she's the kind of person who would. And she does look very queenly. Can't you paint her in anyway?"

"I guess. You said you were looking for me?"

"Oh! Right! The Bs know an art dealer. Mrs B asked about you – one of her friends had seen us chatting out here – and she wanted to know who you were. I said you were a nice painter from Texas and she asked if you'd ever shown anywhere and would she know your work. I said no, you hadn't found a dealer yet, and then she volunteered someone they know, Monsieur Collins – he's Russian, so

he might not want to be called 'Monsieur', but he's been in Paris a few years – 'Collins' isn't very Russian, is it – he must have changed his name – she didn't know if he was looking for new artists, but she'd mention you and see if he was interested." She beamed, clearly proud of herself for potentially making this connection for Jared. "I thanked her profusely."

"Who does he sell? Has he put together any shows I would've seen?"

"I don't know. I just know he likes unknown artists who are doing new and exciting things. Mrs B asked if you painted like Monet and Degas and I said a little bit, but not really. I told her you painted dancers, but I didn't say where they danced." She looked pleased with this bit of subterfuge. "I think you're perfect. I talked you up a lot. I should probably be embarrassed at how I talked to her, like we were friends and not employer and staff." Danneel did not look at all embarrassed, just excited. Jared could just imagine how thrilled she would have been to talk to Mrs B as if they were of the same social standing, as if Mrs B would have sat and chatted with her, one girl to another. He knew she had a crush on her employer, and despite the potential for unprofessional familiarity, she'd take any chance to talk to Mrs B that she could.

"When will she talk to him?"

"Soon, I think. Probably today or tomorrow. She doesn't like to put things off, and I think she mentioned him because they're going to see him. When she tells me what he says, I'll let you know. Hopefully he'll want to meet you and see your art so he can represent you. And now that I've shared that, I have to go." She held up the net bag. "Errands. Cheese. I came way out of my way to find you. I'll see you later." She walked off down the path, leaving Jared to contemplate her words and his potential meeting.

He told Jensen and Christian about it that night and Jensen said that of course this Collins would like Jared's art, Jared was brilliant.

"And if he buys some of your work, you'll finally be able to pay your tab," Christian commented.

"If you'd just accept a painting...", Jared said. Christian rolled his eyes. They had this conversation at least once a week, and Christian's refusal to take art as payment was sometimes just for show and force of habit, considering he'd taken paintings in the past. "I could make another one of you in your Wild West days. You could sell that."

"How reliable is she?" Christian asked.

"Danneel? I trust her."

"How reliable is her Mrs B?"

"I don't know. Danneel trusts her, though."

"Danneel has a crush on her," Jensen murmured, loud enough to remind Jared but too low for Christian to hear.

"That doesn't mean she's not reliable," Jared told him. To Christian, he said "If she said she talked me up to Mrs B, she did. If she said Mrs B will talk me up to her dealer friend, she will. The only question

is whether or not he wants to see my work, and then if he wants to sell it."

"I told you, he will."

"A bottle of wine says he doesn't," Steve said, appearing behind the bar. Jared hadn't realized he was listening.

"That's rude," Jared said, offended. Steve shrugged.

"Deal," Jensen said, extending his arm across the bar so he and Steve could shake on it. "A good red, not that vinegar you keep trying to unload on us." That last comment was directed at Christian, who just rolled his eyes again. Jensen should know that Christian always sold them the good stuff, or at least the fairly decent stuff. They were friends, and he wouldn't give his friends cheap wine. "Monsieur Collins takes Jared on and you owe us a good bottle."

"I'll put it aside right now," Christian told him, making a show of pulling a bottle down from the shelves behind him and hiding it under the bar.

"Make sure you write 'Jared and Jensen's wine' on it." Now Jensen was grinning. "You know, so you don't 'accidentally' open it for someone. Or so Steve doesn't 'accidentally' drink it."

"Yeah yeah. Are you going to drink anything now, or did you just come here to bend my ear and take up space at my bar?"

"What do you have to eat?" Jared asked.

"For you?" Christian quirked an eyebrow. "Cheese and toast."

"We should go to the Green Door and tell the girls," Jensen suggested.

"They won't feed us," Jared said.

"I don't think Christian will either."

"You can have some cheese and bread for the road," Steve offered. "On the house."

"Thanks for giving away my food," Christian said grumpily.

"You would've offered if I hadn't."

"Are you feeling guilty for betting against my success?" Jared asked Steve, grinning. Steve shrugged.

"You are. I knew you couldn't be an asshole all the time."

"Cheese and bread," Jensen repeated, "and we'll get out of your hair." More customers had appeared in the Cherokee, three seating themselves at a table and two now leaning against the bar. Christian slid down the bar and Steve vanished into the back, reappearing a few minutes later with what looked like half a loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese wrapped in waxed paper. Jared took it gratefully and he and Jensen went off to the dance hall to share this potential good news with Sandy and Genevieve and whoever else cared to be excited for him.

Mrs B was as good as Danneel's word, and three days later there was a message for Jared at the Cherokee:

M Collins will meet you next Thursday at 2 pm. Bring samples of your work. Don't worry if your first impression is skepticism about his professionalism; he's very smart and very good at what he does.

Under that was an address and *xoxo Danneel*. Jared wrote her a quick note of thanks and left it with Christian to find someone to deliver it. Jared would have gone himself, and if he was honest he wanted to meet Mrs B, but he had too much to do. Besides, he knew if he sat in the Bois de Boulogne long enough with his easel or drawing board, he would see Danneel and could thank her in person.

He pinned the note to the wardrobe where he was sure to see it, and after that it was a question of what he should bring.

"Don't take any paintings of me," Jensen said, when Jared asked for his help picking things out. He was sitting at the table in the studio trying to write, although from what Jared could tell, all he was really doing was scratching things out and glaring at his notebook.

"I was going to show him *The Bed*," Jared answered, pulling the painting away from the wall and holding it up to see it in better light. "See, it just shows heads from the side."

"Heads in bed. It needs a better frame." Jensen chewed on his pencil. "Ask the brothers for their advice. Aldis will tell you what he thinks."

"I don't care what Aldis thinks. I care what you think."

"Take that one." Jensen pointed his pencil at the painting currently on the easel, Jared's most recent study of the Bois de Boulogne, to which he'd added the woman with the pet ocelot to go with the group of schoolgirls being herded by nuns, a manservant walking a small white dog, and a pair of well-dressed ladies strolling arm-in-arm. It was nearly finished. "Or the one of Christian behind the bar. Some of the sketches of the girls at the Green Door are good."

Jared put *The Bed* down and followed Jensen around the studio, trying to look at his work as a dealer might. He'd tried to get into galleries and shows to see what was new, what the art-buying public wanted, and he could judge the similarities between his own style and what was currently popular. But what would Monsieur Collins want to see? What did he think he could sell? What would he *want* to sell?

He was too nervous to judge his own work. This would be the first time he'd met anyone who could possibly sell his paintings. But he trusted Jensen's eye and opinion, and he listened carefully and tried not to fidget as Jensen moved around the room and told Jared what he thought.

In the end Jared did decide to take *The Bed*, as well as some drawings of the girls at the Green Door – Danneel had told Mrs B he painted dancers, after all – a study of Sandy fixing her hair in front of the wardrobe mirror, a painting of Danneel pushing Baby B's carriage, a different painting of the Bois without any people, a study of workers taking a lunch break near the site of the half-built basilica at the top of Montmartre, and a sketch of Jensen sitting at a table at the Cherokee, writing a letter and smoking. Jared could only hope M Collins liked something.

That morning Steve banged on their door to deliver a note and the grumpy explanation – as Jared read the quickly scrawled words – that M Collins had changed his mind and would be arriving at the studio at 2 pm to see everything Jared had done.

Jared's only response to that was a surprised "Shit".

"I'm going back to bed," Steve grumped, and took off. Jared stared at the note, willing it to be wrong. He glanced around. The place was a mess, dishes and clothes and jars of dirty water and pencils and brushes and tubes of paint and books and paper and canvas everywhere. It seemed as if everything they owned was thrown around the place. For guys without a lot of money, they sure did seem to have a lot of things. He and Jensen would have to make the bed, or at least rearrange the screen to hide it better.

Jensen came out from behind the screen. He'd put on his robe.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"You know the dealer I was supposed to meet today? He's coming here." Jared's heart started to race at the thought. He needed breakfast before he could deal with this. He could always think better on a full stomach.

"We should clean up," Jensen said calmly. "At least this way you won't have to haul your work halfway across the city, or worry that he won't like whatever you brought him."

The more Jared thought about it, the more it made sense this way – M Collins would need to see everything he'd done in order to make an accurate assessment of his work and skills, and the easiest way to do that would be to show up at the studio. Jared could never carry enough to the man's office or gallery to show everything that he thought he was capable of.

M Collins was prompt and the studio was as clean and tidied as Jared and Jensen could make it. Jensen had gone to the Cherokee, claiming he'd only be a distraction and in the way, and Jared should be alone with M Collins to give the dealer the full force of his personality. Jared was washed and shaved and dressed and twitching with nerves when there was a polite knock on the door and he let M Collins in.

The dealer was dressed in a good, if slightly wrinkled, brown patterned suit and a cream-colored shirt. His hair was dark, his eyes blue, and he told Jared to call him Misha.

"Show me everything," he said. "I do not care if it is finished or not, if it is done in oils or watercolors or pastels or charcoal, if it is merely a study or a sketch. I wish to see everything you have done, and then I will sort the wheat from the chaff and tell you what I think. You come highly recommended."

"Thank you," Jared said. "I think." Mrs B must have repeated everything Danneel had told her. And Mrs B had never even met him. She must trust Danneel very much.

He showed Misha around the studio, pulling paintings away from the wall and flipping through sketchbooks and letting Misha thumb through his work. Misha looked at everything – not just Jared's art but also his easel, his charcoals and pencils and paints, the paintbox and collapsible easel he took to paint outside, the prints and postcards and magazine ads and illustrations pinned to the walls, the note from Danneel that was still pinned to the wardrobe door, the little pewter soldiers and the tiny wooden

cactus that his mom had sent him for Christmas, the small stack of dishes that Jensen had forgotten to take back to the Cherokee. It was as if Misha was judging Jared's entire life here, not just his work.

Not only did he look at everything but he asked questions about everything – why had Jared painted that, what was it about the Bois de Boulogne that attracted him so, why did it look as if the light was coming from this direction on that painting, where were these postcards from, who were the girls, was this one done in his studio, what about that one, why had he bought that print, where did he buy his paints and brushes, where had that pot come from, were those supposed to be American soldiers, who had stretched this canvas, where was the music coming from?

"That's the Hodges," Jared explained. "They live next door. One of them's a composer, and the other one is a photographer. He also plays the fiddle."

"Does the music help you work?"

"I'm so used to it I don't really hear it any more."

"I like it." By now Misha had made a circuit of the entire studio and had apparently looked at every single thing in it. He sat at the table and gestured to the other chair. "Sit. Let us talk." Jared sat. "Have you thought of doing illustration? Posters, that kind of thing?"

Jared had seen the posters for Sarah Bernhardt with their flowing lines and organic curves and pretty pastel colors, and everyone knew Toulouse-Lautrec's work for the Moulin Rouge. Somewhere in the mess of the studio were a few copies of the magazine *La Plume*, which Jared had bought for their reviews of art exhibitions and the illustrations done by artists whose work he wanted to know.

"There is money to be made," Misha continued, "and I think some of your sketches will lend themselves nicely to advertisements. You have a good eye for design. I will introduce you to a good printer, if you wish."

"I hadn't thought about it," Jared admitted, although he had asked Christian about designing a poster for the Cherokee, and he'd asked Sandy and Genevieve who he could approach about maybe doing a poster for the Green Door, but nothing had come of either avenue. Christian hadn't thought it necessary – and if Jared and Jensen were going to try to pay off their tab, he wanted cold hard cash rather than a poster advertising his bar – and the girls hadn't had any more success with the manager of the dance hall.

"Think about it. In the meantime, you have a great amount of potential. There is a touch of Degas' dancers in some of your work, but you are painting a different world and you have something else to say. I quite like this one as well" - he stood up and walked over to where *The Bed* was leaning against the wall - "it is very intimate without being voyeuristic, as is much of your work. You are of the world you paint, not merely looking into it. It shows great care, great love."

Well, I'm painting people I love, Jared thought, *of course it shows.*

"Some of it seems quite slapdash," Misha went on, coming back to the table and sitting down, "but that is not a problem in itself. Your technique is good, although I do not know if your watercolors will sell for much, and your pastels could use some work." Jared's disappointment must have shown on his face, because Misha added "Do not look so crestfallen. I like your vision. You just need more practice with the watercolors and pastels, and perhaps some instruction. Are you taking classes?"

"No," Jared admitted sheepishly. He knew he could benefit from professional guidance, but he didn't have the money or the connections to get a place somewhere good.

"No matter. Your Bois de Boulogne pictures are pretty and show a good command of light and shadow, although they can be a bit derivative. But there is still a market for them. I do like the woman walking the cat. That is not a leopard, is it?"

"It's an ocelot," Jared said. "It's too small to be a leopard. I see her in the gardens a lot." He remembered Danneel telling him she thought Mrs B knew the woman with the ocelot. Maybe he could get her to introduce them, if Misha took him on and he started to sell.

"Jennifer did not lie to me about you. She said you were good, and you are. I can see the lack of training here and there, but your sense of design is good, your subjects interesting, and as I said, most of the time your technique is sure. I would like to show your work. I believe I can sell you."

It took Jared a minute to realize that "Jennifer" was probably Mrs B, and then it took him another minute to remember his manners, more or less. "No shit! Really? Thank you."

Misha didn't look at all taken aback by the swearing. "Let us shake on it," he said, holding out his hand. Jared shook it. He couldn't believe it was this easy. Shouldn't he sign a contract? "I need some time to draw up a contract for you, but if you could come to the house on Saturday I will have it ready. Come at three. We will sign it and have tea."

Well, that answered that question. But it still seemed easy. It wasn't even two weeks since Danneel told him she'd mentioned him to Mrs B and Mrs B had said she'd ask her friend the art dealer if he would see Jared's work. Jared knew people could toil for years without recognition. He wished Danneel had talked to Mrs B sooner.

He wondered if he should bring Misha a thank-you painting, something small. Maybe one of his paintings of the girls at the dance hall, or something in charcoal. Misha seemed to like the charcoal drawings. Maybe Christian would pose in his Wild West get-up. Some Parisians had a thing for cowboys and the American west. Although Misha was Russian, and Jared didn't know what Russians liked.

"Bring that one, that one, and that one," Misha went on, pointing at the painting of Genevieve lacing another girl into her corset backstage at the Green Door, the nearly-finished painting of the Bois de Boulogne with the woman walking her ocelot and the little girls with their nuns, and the sketch of Genevieve pulling on her black stockings. "And we will see what we will see."

They shook hands again at the door, Misha said "You have my address, yes?" and when Jared said he did, Misha left. Jared waited until he was sure Misha was out of sight, and then he practically ran to the Cherokee to share his good news.

"Told you," Jensen said smugly to Steve, who sighed exaggeratedly as he retrieved the bottle of wine they'd bet from behind the bar. Someone had actually written "Jared and Jensen's wine" on the glass with a black wax crayon. Christian put out four glasses and they drank a toast to Jared's success.

The four of them killed the bottle and then Jared and Jensen went to the Green Door, where Sandy and

Genevieve congratulated Jared and two of the other dancers volunteered themselves to help him celebrate. He made Jensen tell them in very polite French thank you, but no thank you, his boyfriend wouldn't approve. In response, the girls said something to Jared that Jensen wouldn't translate, and then they giggled, amused and entirely unoffended.

"Why won't you tell me what they said?" Jared asked.

"Because you need to learn the language yourself," Jensen told him. "I'll show you what it was later."

They stayed for the show and then took Sandy and Genevieve back to the Cherokee, where they drank and talked and danced and finally reeled home near sunrise. Jared would have thought he had drunk too much to be any use in bed, although he was certainly excited enough about so many things, but Jensen kissed his mouth and his jaw and his throat and thumbed his nipples and stroked his inner thighs and spoke French to him in a throaty, intensely sexy voice until Jared was stiff and aching and Jensen was straddling him and sinking down onto his cock.

They rocked and bounced on the bed, panting and moaning, their combined weight and efforts making the bed creak underneath them. The windows rattled as the wind whistled around the building, as if the entire factory was in motion to the rhythm of Jared and Jensen's love.

Jensen leaned down down, his lips barely an inch from Jared's as he fucked himself faster and faster on Jared's cock. Jared was overwhelmed with the heat of him, the weight of him, the wine of his breath and the flush on his cheeks and the freckles scattered across his skin like flecks of cinnamon. Jared breathed him in until that breath stuttered as they both shuddered and came.

Afterwards, Jared stayed conscious long enough to wrap himself around Jensen's warm, sweaty limbs and murmured, "I love you so much," into his hair. He was pretty sure Jensen said something in return – it sounded like "Je t'aime toujours", which was some of the only French Jared knew – but then he was asleep.

He spent all of Friday trying to organize his work and then walking around the city looking at advertising posters. It wasn't until that night, when he and Jensen were sitting in the Cherokee trying to convince Christian to feed them, that he remembered he never told Danneel what had happened and he had never thanked her. He borrowed a pen and a sheet of paper from a poet sitting in a corner – he and Jensen had seen the guy several times over the past couple of weeks but had never learned his name – and scribbled a quick note:

M Collins said he would take me on! He told me to call him Misha! I'm signing a contract tomorrow (Saturday)! Thank you! Thank Mrs B too! I owe you a drink!

He folded the note into quarters, handed it over the bar, and asked Christian to get someone to deliver it. Christian looked expectant. Jared sighed, dug into his pocket, and retrieved a few centimes.

"When I sell something I'll pay you back," he said. "I promise."

"Uh-huh." Christian was unconvinced.

"I know, I know, we've had this conversation before. But I have a dealer now."

"You still haven't sold anything."

He fed them anyway.

On Saturday Jared wrapped the two paintings and the sketch Misha wanted in brown paper, put on his best suit, and went to Misha's house to sign the contract that would ideally lead to artistic success and good money. The sun warmed his back and shoulders, a mild flower-scented breeze ruffled his hair, and Paris was pink and blue and red and yellow and green and white, and it smelled of people and horses and cut grass and slowly-warming stone. Jared couldn't help whistling as he walked through well-kept arrondissements to Misha's house.

A maid answered the door when Jared rang the bell. She made him wait in the foyer while she went to fetch Misha, who appeared before Jared had much of a chance to do more than peer down the hallway and try to look up the stairs and peek into the closest room. He got a glimpse of dark walls and three different styles of chair and some framed botanical prints before Misha appeared and led him away.

They walked down the hall and into a high-ceilinged eclectically-decorated parlor and a library before finally stopping in a room at the back of the house, with tall windows overlooking an overgrown back garden. There was a heavy desk in the middle of the room, two glass-fronted bookcases, papers and knick-knacks everywhere, and paintings and drawings covering what felt like every inch of wall. Jared stared. There was no rhyme or reason to the arrangement of art, no unifying theme or style – some of the paintings looked very avant-garde, some of them more classical, and a few were oddly stylized in a way that looked almost medieval.

"Not all my clients," Misha said. "Some are simply pieces I like." He gestured to a medieval-looking painting that Jared had been admiring. "That one is by a painter from Odessa, and the small one next to it I brought from St Petersburg." He took the paintings and the sketch from Jared, leaned them against the desk, and picked up a long sheet of paper covered with writing. "Here, I have your contract. Read it over, and if it is to your liking, sign. And we will have an agreement." He smiled.

Jared read it over, or tried to – it was in French and English, and while he thought Misha's terms were fair, in terms of payment percentages and rights and responsibilities, he'd never had a thorough conversation with anyone knowledgeable about this kind of thing and didn't know for sure if he was being offered a good deal.

Misha would no doubt say he was. He decided to trust the guy. He signed.

"Excellent," Misha said. "And you have brought me the pieces I asked for. Now we will have tea like civilized men." He pulled a tasseled cord that was hanging from the ceiling. Five minutes later a middle-aged woman in a white apron and cap brought in a tray bearing a teapot, two teacups, a plate of pastries, and a pot of jam. She put the tray on the table, bobbed her head, and went out.

Misha poured tea for both of them and stirred some jam into his cup. "Russians prefer preserves in their tea," he explained, "rather than sugar. We have strawberry today. Try it." He dropped a spoonful into Jared's teacup and stirred it, and when Jared looked at it dubiously – strawberry jam? Really? - Misha sipped his own tea and made encouraging motions with his free hand. So Jared tried it. He got a couple of seeds and a tiny piece of strawberry with his first sip, and the sweet, strange, and vaguely fruity taste of adulterated black tea. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not. Maybe he was just too used to strong coffee sometimes lightly touched with milk, but unsweetened.

Misha offered him the plate of pastries, and he took a tiny napoleon that flaked into delicious sugary nothing in his mouth when he bit into it.

He would write home and tell his parents that he had found a dealer to sell his art, and the two of them had drunk tea in the Russian style to celebrate signing the contract.

A small, spiky creature with a pointed nose trundled speedily into the room, chased by the maid who had brought the tea. The creature waddled right up to Misha, who picked it up, brought it close to his face, and made affectionate Russian-sounding noises at it. Its spikes were white and brown, the fur on its wide belly and sides was white, and its little black nose twitched as Misha talked to it.

"This is my Yozhik," he said, holding it out towards Jared. It made a weird squeaky noise that he couldn't begin to decipher. Was it mad at him? Trying to make friends? Was it speaking Russian? Or French? "She was a gift to me from a mad Moroccan." He brushed his finger over the creature's quills. "She likes to have the run of the house but generally she is not allowed." Jared must have looked dubious again, because Misha continued "Have you never met a hedgehog before?"

"No. Is it – she? – is she poisonous?" She had short skinny legs that looked too frail to support her wide, teardrop-shaped body. She scrunched up her face at Jared so that she looked as if she had eyebrows and they did not approve of him.

Misha laughed. "Of course not. But she might quill you if you are mean to her. My wife has a cat who tried to sit on her once. He learned his lesson after Victoria spent some time pulling quills out of his bum. Russians are very fond of hedgehogs. There are some very good jokes, but I do not believe they translate well."

"That's okay," Jared said. He wondered what Misha's wife was like. "Victoria" didn't sound Russian, but Misha was the first Russian he'd ever met, so who knew? But her name wasn't French either.

The maid was apologizing to Misha in French. He handed the hedgehog over, told her, "Merci," and something Jared didn't understand, and she took herself and the hedgehog out of the room.

"I would like to get her a friend," Misha said, "but I have been told that tame hedgehogs do not like the company of their own kind. She does not like cats. Perhaps a dog. What do you think? Should I get a dog?"

Jared thought of the maids and manservants who he sometimes saw in the Bois de Boulogne walking their masters' or mistresses' dogs, and the well-dressed ladies with their spoiled lapdogs. He didn't think Misha was that kind of person – he would probably walk his dog himself, and he didn't seem the kind of person who would own a twitchy little dog.

"I don't know," he said. "Do you like dogs?"

"Well enough. Hm. I will think on it." He knelt on the floor to take the paper off the paintings and the sketch that Jared brought. "Now. Tell me about these pieces. Why this girl, why these scenes?"

"Well, the one of the Bois de Boulogne, I go there to paint a lot, to get the light and to paint the people. That's where I met Danneel, actually. Uh. Miss Harris."

"Jennifer's nanny. I have not met her, but Jennifer is pleased with her. She is the one who told Jennifer about you."

"Yeah, she did. Anyway, it's a great place to paint. The woman with the ocelot, I see her there a lot. She's beautiful and graceful and I just like to paint her, and I've never seen anyone with a jungle cat as a pet. So she adds something a little interesting and different to the picture."

"And these?" Misha gestured to the other two, the painting of Genevieve and another dancer at the Green Door, and the sketch of Genevieve pulling on her stockings.

"That's my friend Genevieve. She dances at a place called the Green Door. Uh. La Porte Verte." He never called the cabaret by its French name, and so usually forgot that most other people would. Misha nodded, prompting Jared to wonder if he'd heard of it, or even if he'd been there. It wasn't anywhere near as famous as the Moulin Rouge, but it could attract an interestingly mixed crowd, and Jared knew that even wealthy men and women liked to come to Montmartre to see how the quaint poor people and the artists entertained themselves. The men at least came to sleep with the girls and the occasional boy. "The dancers let me sit backstage or in the dressing room and draw them. That one, I liked the line Genevieve made as she put her foot on the chair and bent over to pull her stockings up, and I thought the black was a nice contrast to her white skirts and red bodice."

"A bit Snow White, perhaps. Skirts as white as snow, stockings as black as ebony, bodice as red as blood." Misha grinned. "Did you know, the Grimm brothers softened the original German tales so that children would not be afraid? They were much darker before. I believe there was more cannibalism. Are you going to make this one into a painting?"

"I don't know. I do a lot of sketches and drawings of the girls. Most of the dancers like me to draw them, so they'll take the sketches when I'm done, so of course I have to draw more. They're really good practice for fabric and just... people, expressions and motion and gestures and body shapes and hair and everything. I'll sit out in the hall and draw the audience and the dancers."

"As I said in your studio, your work is very intimate – you know this world you paint, these people. There is indeed a bit of Degas in your drawings and paintings of your dance hall girls. Little of your work looks posed. It is very natural. I am merely curious why you paint what you do, why it is this world and not another."

Jared shrugged. Misha didn't sound judgmental, and he'd seen all of Jared's work and still wanted to sell him, so clearly there was a market for paintings of dance hall girls getting dressed and bricklayers eating their lunch and couples lying in bed, just as he already knew there was a market for paintings of gardens full of spring sunlight and gorgeously-dressed women out for a stroll.

"I paint what I see," he said. "I paint my friends. I think the ordinary can be beautiful, so that's what I want to show." Sebastian had told him once that he didn't have airs, that he and his work were honest. But it seemed arrogant to repeat that to Misha.

"You are not wrong, about the beauty of ordinary things and ordinary people. Leave these two with me." He pointed to the sketch and the painting of Genevieve and the other girl. "And this one, of the gardens, finish it. It needs very little work and I have a buyer in mind for it. Now. I am putting together a kind of group exhibition of new painters, perhaps ten or fifteen pieces from each, along with another

dealer who is a friend of mine. We have nearly all the artists and it is to open a month from now. I would like from you fifteen good pieces to show. I will choose them, so you must have more than fifteen for me to see."

Jared's heart skipped in shock. Was this how it always worked, once you'd found a dealer? Were you immediately put to work preparing for a show? He shouldn't complain, and he shouldn't panic – he didn't think he had fifteen paintings, finished or not, that were good enough for an exhibition, but he did have some good work, and maybe Misha would take some drawings as well.

"Do they all have to be paintings?"

"Most of them, yes. I will consider taking a few drawings if they are good enough. This one I would show." He tapped the top of the painting of the Green Door. "And some of the others showing your dance hall girls. Perhaps a painting of your prostitutes, for a bit of scandal." He grinned. "I recall a study of a girl in front of a mirror, fixing her hair."

"Sandy in front of my wardrobe mirror. That's a study for a painting."

"Paint it. And the one of the couple in bed, I will show that one."

The Bed. Jared and Jensen under their patchwork duvet, just woken up and smiling at each other. It was a love letter as much as any words Jared might have written. He couldn't sell it. Jensen wouldn't let him.

"That one's not for sale."

"No? Perhaps I can show it anyway. It demonstrates what you do."

Jensen would kill him, if it went on display for who knew how many strangers.

"Can I think about it?"

"Yes, but do not think too long. You have work to do. Ah, I forgot, a copy of your contract." Misha pulled another piece of paper from one of the piles on his desk, scrawled his signature and the date on it, and handed it to Jared. "This is for you. You may wish to sign it." He grinned and handed Jared a pen, and Jared added his signature to the bottom. He folded the contract up and put it in his inside coat pocket. "Wonderful. Now you will paint and I will sell, and we will be friends. More tea? Take a biscuit." He offered the plate of pastries and Jared took a tiny cream puff. It wasn't much more than a single bite, no bigger than the napoleon had been earlier, but the pastry's crisp plain-tasting shell was filled with fluffy vanilla-scented cream whipped to within an inch of its life, and the one bite was enough to convince him that he could eat a whole pile of them.

"One more thing," Misha went on. He set down the plate, opened one of the desk drawers, and pulled out a business card. He scribbled something on the back and handed it to Jared. "Make yourself a list and on Monday, go here and ask for Mademoiselle Liu. She will help you with whatever you need – paints, brushes, canvas, new pastels – and you will have her send the bill to me."

Jared looked at the card dubiously. A shop for artists' supplies, on a street he didn't recognize. But he didn't need anything. Well, he could use an advance to start to pay Christian back.

He didn't get an advance. But he did get several cookies for the road, round Russian tea cookies that tasted a bit like gingerbread with a pepperminty glaze and that Misha said were called *pryaniki*, and a reminder to go shopping on Monday.

He couldn't quite believe this was happening. He had a signed contract inside his jacket and an upcoming exhibition and he still couldn't believe it.

On Monday he went to see Mademoiselle Liu and let her lead him around her beautifully arranged shop, picking out these paints and those brushes and this paper and ordering a bunch of canvases and just loading him up with supplies. She admitted to being a painter herself, but told Jared that no, she'd never shown her work, she painted for her own pleasure and to give things to her friends.

She arranged to have all his purchases delivered to the studio, and when the delivery boy showed up on Tuesday Jensen was home and could help Jared unpack and arrange everything. They admired the class of a place that routinely provided that kind of service.

"Now I can paint you with the best brushes that Paris has to offer," Jared said, waving one of those very brushes in Jensen's direction. Jensen just laughed and shook his head. "Just wait. Someday you'll walk into a gallery and see yourself on every wall."

"Better to see myself in every bookseller's," Jensen countered. "I'm so proud of you."

"Even though I haven't sold anything yet?" Unless the painting and the sketch that he'd left at Misha's house counted.

"You will. Come here." Jared went over to him. Jensen took the brush out of Jared's hand, tossed it at the couch, and pulled Jared's face down for a kiss. It was a long kiss, a deep kiss, and Jared returned it enthusiastically. Soon he was dropping to his knees and opening Jensen's pants to take Jensen's cock in his mouth, to tease the head with swipes of his tongue and to hum as he sucked, trying to make Jensen vibrate with pleasure against his mouth. Jensen cupped the back of his head with a steady hand, breath hitching as Jared took him as deep as he could. He needed Jensen to know exactly how grateful he was for Jensen's support of him and pride in him and love for him.

Arranging all his new paints and brushes and charcoal pencils could wait.



Backstage at the Green Door

On Friday Danneel sent a note to the Cherokee explaining that she was needed at the house through Saturday afternoon, but she had been given the evening off. If Jared was free, she wanted to celebrate with him. She hadn't had a chance to really congratulate him on finding a dealer and getting a show. And as she pointed out, she could finally meet his friends.

"Take her to the Green Door," Christian suggested. "Make her buy you dinner first." He grinned. Jared rolled his eyes. He'd never asked Danneel what kind of money she made as a nanny, and for all he knew, her salary consisted of room and board and a franc a week for spending money. And if that was so, he could hardly ask her to spend it on him.

She met him and Jensen at the Cherokee, where Christian and Steve teased her and fed her, and from there Jared and Jensen took her to the Green Door to introduce her to Sandy and Genevieve. Jared couldn't believe they'd never met before. Danneel didn't seem at all bothered by being invited into the dressing room of a dance hall, or sitting on the broken-down sofa chatting with dancing girls in various stages of dress, but then, Jared had never been bothered either, and the girls had never cared.

"I think Genevieve is really taken with your friend," Sandy confided to Jared, as the show started and half the girls vanished to dance in it. Danneel and Jensen had already gone out to find a table. "Lace me up."

He pulled at her corset laces, trying not to yank too hard. "Danneel has a crush on her boss," he said.

"Well, I think Genevieve has a crush on her." He could barely feel her chest expand as she took an experimental breath. "That's good." He tied off the laces and Sandy turned to face him. She patted her hair and adjusted her shirt. "Emmanuelle told me about a bar we should try. I know you love the Cherokee, but we're still celebrating your good fortune, right? I want to stand you a round somewhere new."

A girl poked her head in the dressing room and called Sandy's name, apparently telling her that she should be out on the floor. Sandy patted Jared's arm, said "Wait for us after the show," and went out to dance. Jared snuck out of the dressing room and crept around the dance hall until he found Danneel and Jensen. Danneel was sipping her wine and watching the show, and Jensen had just finished rolling a cigarette. Jared sat down, kissed Jensen on the cheek, and whispered "Sandy wants to take us to some new bar after this."

"Okay," Jensen said. He lit the cigarette and took a drag. "I have some money."

"She wants to buy us a round."

"Just one?" Jensen grinned around his cigarette.

"One to start." Jared leaned across the table and touched Danneel's arm to get her attention. When she turned to look at him, he told her "We're going out with Sandy and Genevieve after this. Is that okay?" She nodded.

After a while, Jared asked Danneel to dance, and then he asked Jensen, and then Danneel asked Jensen, and then Sandy came out and sat with them for a little bit. After the show, the five of them stopped at the Cherokee to say hi to Christian and Steve and have a few drinks before continuing on to the bar Sandy had heard about, which was a dim, smoky, overdecorated place called La Chenille.

"The Caterpillar," Jensen whispered to Jared, knowing Jared's French was still not that good. Jared pointed out the caterpillar drawn on the menu, and kissed Jensen anyway for trying to be helpful.

They drank brandy from wide-bottomed glasses and absinthe from glasses with bubbles in the stems to

indicate how much of the liquor a person should pour. Sandy demonstrated the proper way to drink it, with a sugar cube sitting on a tiny slotted spoon laid across the rim of the glass, water slowly dripping onto it from a faucet in a small brass fountain. Absinthe tasted like green, like herbs and spring meadows, and Jared lost track of how much he drank. He only knew that he was drunk and happy – wildly, ridiculously happy, sitting with his friends and his boyfriend in this velvet-covered, decadent bar, laughing and drinking and kissing and forgetting everything except that he was in Paris with people he loved. Everything was soft and green and beautiful, and Jensen's mouth tasted like cigarettes and sugar, and the feathers in Genevieve's hat waved in the bar's heavy air like graceful blue-black fingers. Sandy's head against his shoulder and her hand on his thigh were two small comforting pressures and Danneel's laugh was music when Genevieve pulled her to her feet to dance, the two of them swaying to a song only they could hear.

There was an absinthe-and-smoke haze over everything, making the overstuffed velvet couches and tasseled wall hangings and carved wooden roses and even the unnaturally-green liqueur feel unreal. People moved in and out of Jared's vision like creatures in a fairy tale. The murmur of conversation all around them was the running of water, the low bubbling of a river. Jared could well believe he'd dreamed this place, lush and low-ceilinged and full of things and people he could never focus on long enough to paint.

He found himself sitting on a sofa, Jensen sitting half on top of him, leaning against him, a hand heavy on his thigh.

"You're amazing," Jensen murmured in his ear, words warm and blurred. "I'm so lucky you're mine." He pressed his lips to Jared's jaw. "We'll go home later and I'll show you exactly how lucky."

"Show me now," Jared murmured in response, feeling a tingling in his cock and the conviction that he could get hard like *that* with almost no prompting. But Jensen only laughed, took Jared's chin in one hand, turned his face, and licked at his mouth. Jared's lips parted for his tongue and they lost themselves in a deep, slow, sugar-laced, absinthe-flavored kiss.

Jared was sure they must have gone back to the studio eventually, but he never could remember the five of them actually leaving the Caterpillar and making their unsteady way home. He only knew when he woke up naked, in his bed, feeling a little hungover and still a little drunk. He was quite surprised and weirdly embarrassed to find Sandy, equally naked, asleep next to him. He very carefully turned his head to discover a completely unclothed Jensen on his other side. He was pretty sure he remembered Sandy straddling him and enthusiastically riding his cock, but he couldn't remember doing anything with Jensen, at least not in this bed. Another careful glance behind him, and it looked as if there was lipstick on Jensen's cock. That was odd. Sandy wouldn't have sucked him off, and neither Danneel nor Genevieve liked men.

Jared's lips felt weirdly sticky and gummy. He rubbed at them with the back of his hand, and then stared uncomprehendingly at the waxy red smear on his skin. Oh, he finally realized, he must have put on someone's lipstick, or she put it on him, and then he blew his boyfriend. He really wanted to remember that. How much had he drunk last night?

He needed to pee. He needed to go back to sleep. He could use a drink to take the edge off his incipient hangover.

Sandy solved at least one of his problems by stirring, opening her eyes, blinking at him, and smiling.

"Morning," she murmured. She pushed hair out of her face with one hand. "I think it's still morning."

"Did we..." he asked. "Last night, you and I?"

"We did." Her smile widened. "You were good."

So he hadn't imagined it. Good to know. "Did you... did you take advantage of me?" He didn't think she would, but he had to ask.

She shook her head, still smiling. "Of course not. You kissed me first."

"Did Jensen – "

"I think he might have dared you. He watched us. Watching you get off turns him on. And then I watched you go down on him." She yawned and closed her eyes again. "I liked that. He did too."

"Can you... I mean, I have to – "

"Okay, okay." She rolled off the bed, and as soon as he followed, she climbed back onto the mattress.

Jared tiptoed as fast as he could out of the studio and down the hall to the toilet, too desperate to relieve himself to care that he was naked. He tiptoed back and this time he noticed Danneel and Genevieve lying tangled together on the sofa. They were both half-dressed and Danneel had a feather in her hair.

He tried to remember if they had done anything besides dance with each other, and he was pretty sure they'd kissed, and it made him smile. Danneel should be with someone who would return her affections. Her employers wouldn't be thrilled that she was seeing a dancing girl, but he couldn't imagine why she'd tell them. He was pretty sure they wouldn't be thrilled with anything she'd done last night, not least among them the fact that she hadn't gone home.

He tiptoed back around the screen hiding the bed and climbed over Sandy to snuggle next to Jensen. The things he could remember from last night were a little crazy but generally good – he was pretty sure Christian had opened the tiny storage room in back of the Cherokee so Jared could bend Jensen over a stack of crates and fuck him, and he was pretty sure Jensen had stuck flowers in his hair at the Caterpillar and called him a pretty pretty princess – so he could only guess that the things he couldn't remember were good too. They'd have to go back there and have absinthe again.

He was woken an indeterminate time later by Danneel shaking his shoulder and demanding to know what time it was.

"I'm late," she insisted, "the Bs will fire me. What have I done, I'm going to lose my job, I'll have to go back to Louisiana, my parents will be so ashamed – "

Jared blinked at her, completely confused. "Slow down," he said. He realized Jensen had left – he must have gone out to find something to eat – but Sandy was still deep in sleep on his other side.

"If they send me away – " Danneel started to say, but Jared reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Shh. What's wrong?"

"I had the night off. I didn't have to go to church with them this morning – Mrs B likes to take the baby out herself, while Mr B is at mass, and then they meet somewhere for lunch – they would have let me sleep in so they might not know I never came home, but I can't be gone when they get back." Her face was pale, her hair a tangled mess. She'd lost the feather and had gotten fully dressed. "I feel sick."

Jared let go of her arm so he could sit up very carefully. He patted the mattress. "Sit."

"I can't. I have to go. Tell Genevieve – I don't know. Make something up. Tell her I enjoyed – " She stopped, evidently remembering whatever it was she'd enjoyed, and Jared couldn't help smiling at the thought. She didn't seem to notice. "I enjoyed last night. Tell her that. Tell her I'll see her again when I can, I promise."

"You had a good time?"

"I had a wonderful time. But I can't lose my job for it."

"Go home. I'll tell her goodbye for you. Good luck."

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

He was about to ask her what she was thanking him for, but she pulled her arm free and ran out. Jared thought about going back to sleep, but he was up now and he wanted to be awake when Jensen came home, so he slowly climbed out of bed, slowly got dressed, found the washbasin, and slowly went out and down the hall to the sink. He needed to do more than wash his face – he needed a long hot soak in a big bath – but he could at least try to boil water for tea for himself and Sandy and Genevieve and scrub his face with whatever water was left.

After that, he had to get back to work. It was one thing to learn that he'd been chosen to show his work in an exhibition, but another thing entirely to produce enough good paintings for it.

Misha came by the studio a couple of weeks after he and Jared signed the contract, to take another look at all of Jared's work and ideally pick out some pieces for the show. It was a short visit but a productive one, and Jared was left with a renewed sense of excitement for his work and a list as long as his arm of things to do. Most of those things were "Paint this" or "Work on that" or "Finish this one" – although one of them was "Get a haircut" – and fortunately they were things he actively wanted to do.

One overcast day he was in the studio alone, so absorbed in his painting that it was a few minutes before he heard a weird *tik* kind of noise, and a few minutes after that when he realized it was someone throwing pebbles at the windows. He'd been expecting it to rain, so some of the windows were closed in preparation. He crossed to the wall, pushed the window open, and looked out.

"L'Américain!" yelled a boy standing in the street at the bottom of the building. Jared recognized him as one of the kids who hung around the Green Door trying to sneak in and who sometimes ran errands for the dancers. It looked like the boy was holding another pebble ready to throw. "Hé! L'Américain!"

"What?" Jared called down, and then because he should really be trying to speak the language, "Qu'est que c'est?" *What is it?*

That was a mistake, as the boy let loose with a flurry of words too fast for Jared to understand. He couldn't remember how to tell the boy to slow down.

"Venez, venez!" the boy called, waving and gesturing in a way that Jared understood as "Get down here and come with me", and he remembered that was what "Venez" meant. *Come, come*. He put his brush in a jar of water and went out and down to the street to see what the boy wanted.

What the boy wanted was to take him back to the dance hall, chattering in incomprehensible French the whole way. Jared caught a word here and there, but he couldn't get the gist of the conversation until they were at the Green Door and walking through to the dressing room in back. Jensen was lying on the dilapidated couch with half-dressed girls fussing over him and a boy Jared didn't recognize sitting on a chair looking wide-eyed and guilty.

One of the girls grabbed the boy who'd brought Jared, hissed at him angrily, and shoved him back out the door.

"He's not supposed to be back here," Sandy explained, appearing at Jared's elbow. "They're always trying to sneak in." She pulled him over to the couch, shoving girls out of the way as she did so. Genevieve was kneeling on the floor, dabbing at a cut and a goose egg on Jensen's forehead and calling him an idiot. He had a black eye and was holding a wad of what was either two regular or one very large handkerchief to his nose. His knuckles were scraped and he looked a little pale, but he murmured something to Genevieve and gestured to Jared with his free hand, and she scooted out of the way.

"What the hell happened to you?" Jared demanded.

"I got in a fight," Jensen explained. He pulled the wad of handkerchief away from his nose. The fabric was covered with blood but his nose was thankfully dry.

"It was my fault," piped up the boy in the chair. He got up and came over to the couch. Jared could hear the murmuring of concerned and curious dancing girls. He wanted to tell them to shut up. "I was, um, I think I was in the wrong place." He had curly black hair and was dressed in a well-fitting suit that Jared could tell cost good money. This close he looked about seventeen, and now Jared could see a tinge of excitement on his face along with the guilt.

"Couple guys thought he was for rent," Jensen said. He tried to sit up. Jared caught the grimace of pain as he did so.

"You weren't?" Jared asked the boy, who shook his head, although now it was obvious that he wasn't from the neighborhood, to live or to work – his clothes were wrong, his worried expression, his voice.

"Wrong place, wrong time. I had to step in and save his ass. Literally." Jensen chuckled. Jared glared at the kid, who shrank back.

"Don't," Sandy murmured. "He was scared. Luckily it happened nearby and when he went to the boulangerie for help, the baker sent his assistant with a rolling pin. They recognized Jensen and brought him here. He could have run and left Jensen there."

"What's your name, kid?" Jared asked him.

"Anton," the kid said. "I didn't mean for your friend to get hurt. I wanted to see the dancers." Genevieve rolled her eyes, but he didn't see her.

"It's okay, Jared," Jensen said. He touched the bump on his forehead and winced. "It could have been worse. One of the guys ran off when they realized I was going to fight back. The other one was tough" - he shrugged - "but once the baker's assistant got there...." He let the thought trail off. Jared tried to think which bakery it was likely to be, and which baker's assistant. There weren't many. "The girls grabbed one of the boys who's always hanging around and sent him for you."

"Good thing I wasn't painting outside today," Jared said. "Are you okay? We should go home." He could feel a rising rage at the man who'd beaten Jensen up, and he knew he should leave the vicinity before he tried to find the guy and exact revenge.

"Yeah, I should be." Jensen swung his legs over the side of the couch and stood up. Jared held his arm for support. "Thank the kid," he told Sandy and Genevieve. "Whichever one went to get Jared."

"Can I stay?" Anton asked. One of the girls whispered to the others standing around her, and they giggled and nodded at him.

"Won't your parents be worried?" Sandy asked, and when he shook his head, she smiled at him and said "Sure, we'll take care of you. You might get more than you bargained for." His eager expression seemed to say he sure hoped so. "Take care of him," she told Jared, standing on tiptoe and pulling on his shoulder so she could kiss him on the cheek.

"And you," Genevieve added, pointing to Jensen, "you could invest in boxing lessons." She looked serious but Jensen grinned at her. Jared took him home.

At least he tried to, because they ran into one of the girls who was coming in as they were going out. Jared was pretty sure her name was Emmanuelle, but she was fairly new to the Green Door and he wasn't completely positive. If that was who she was, it meant she was the girl who'd recommended the Caterpillar, where he'd drunk too much absinthe and thought his life was beautiful and perfect.

"Et bien le pianiste!" she said, her eyebrows pulling together in worry. She reached up to touch Jensen's face. "Qu'est-ce qui t'es arrivé?"

Jensen told her what had happened – or at least Jared assumed he did – and then she asked "Ce soir? You play, no?" and wiggled her fingers in a vague approximation of playing the piano.

"Yeah, I think so," he said.

"Bon." She nodded, apparently satisfied, although she still looked a little worried. She pointed a firm finger at Jared in a surprisingly mom-like gesture. "You. You look for – non, look out. Yes?" This was directed at Jensen, who nodded. "Look out for better." She muttered something under her breath that made Jensen chuckle, and then she went inside.

"What did she say?" Jared demanded, as they started down the street.

"Some lover you are," Jensen translated, still grinning. "She just thinks you should take better care of

me. Spend more time with me, I think."

"I don't spend enough time with you?" What if Jensen was feeling abandoned? Especially now that Jared had an upcoming exhibition to prepare for. The last thing he wanted was for his boyfriend to feel like he didn't care about him.

"I didn't say that. If we spent every waking hour together we'd drive each other insane. Don't worry about it. If you come see the show tonight you'll see me." His grin widened.

"I should walk you there."

"I'll be fine. I feel a little better already." He looked less pale, at least. And his steps were sure, not limping or wobbly. "I just need something to drink. I'll be okay."

They paused at the corner to let a carriage pass and Jared looked at him dubiously. Jensen leaned in and dropped a quick kiss on his lips.

"Walk me if it makes you feel better," he said.

"What if those guys come back? What if the baker's assistant – "

"Jan."

"Jan?"

"He's Belgian. Flemish. I heard him talking to the girls. He works at the Boulangerie Dumont. We should – " He looked around as they crossed the street. "I think it's the other way. Well, later we'll go in and thank him."

"Don't do that again," Jared murmured.

"Do what?"

"Get into a fight on the street."

"That's what Genevieve said. But what was I supposed to do? Anton couldn't defend himself. Did you get a look at him? He's just a rich kid from some posh arrondissement who wants to hang out with the bohemians and the pretty girls in Montmartre. I couldn't let some hulk think he was for sale." He stopped and grabbed Jared's arm. "You would've done the same thing. This is nothing." He pointed to his eye, black and purple and painful-looking. Jared couldn't help but wince in sympathy. "Remember when you elbowed me in the face? Christian used to throw things at my head when we were kids."

Jared didn't say anything. He didn't want to open his mouth and have anger come out. It wasn't really Jensen he was mad at, anyway.

"You know I'm right," Jensen went on. He tilted his head like he was showing off the black eye. "You don't think it makes me look tough?" He winked.

"But your face," Jared protested lamely. Jensen shrugged.

"It'll heal. Black eyes usually do." They were nearly home and the boys could see someone sitting on the front stoop of their building. "Who's that?"

It was Aldis, from the studio next door to theirs. He explained that he was locked out and his brother had the key.

"You can't just break in?" Jared interrupted. "Our place is really easy to break into."

"I installed a good lock," Aldis explained. "I don't want to break the door down, but I have work to do and photographs to develop and I gotta get in as soon as Edwin comes back. Can I wait in your studio?"

"Sure," Jensen said.

"What happened to you?"

"I saved a boy's honor. You should see the other guy."

That night Jared walked Jensen back to the Green Door, as promised, and snuck into the dressing room to find Anton still sitting there chatting animatedly with the dancers. Anton was glad to see him, and after the girls kicked them out and they found a table in the dance hall, Anton apologized again for getting Jensen into a fight and bought Jared a carafe of the best wine the cabaret could offer. Jensen got a quick break, which he used to come visit their table, lean over Jared's shoulder, and drain his glass.

"Your eye looks terrible," Anton told him, sounding impressed more than anything else. "Does it hurt?"

"A little bit," Jensen admitted. "It's a weird ache. I'll be fine." Jared knew he must have looked dubious, because Jensen repeated himself in a more determined voice. "I'll be fine."

Jared refilled his glass and handed it to Jensen, who drank half of it before handing it back.

"I found out the fiddler's a poet," he said. The Green Door employed a fiddler and sometimes a drummer to play for the dancers, as well as the pianist. "He hasn't had anything published either. But at least he can write."

"It'll happen," Jared said. "Maybe playing here will help you."

"Maybe." Jensen shrugged. "I should get back. Don't let him get you in any trouble." He patted Anton on the head and went back to the piano near the stage.

Anton stayed until the cabaret closed. Jared didn't think it was that big a deal, but Jensen thought he should have gone home earlier.

"I'll take a carriage," Anton said to this, shrugging. "Or I could go –"

"You're not going home with one of the girls."

Anton's face fell. Jared resisted the urge to laugh.

They walked down to the Moulin Rouge, where Jared and Jensen thought Anton had a better chance of finding a carriage to take him home, and they waited with him until he had flagged one down and gotten in it. And then they went back to the studio and went to bed.

On Friday Danneel left a message that she had Saturday night off, although she really had to sleep in her own bed this time, and she'd meet them at the Cherokee around eight.

"But I still have paintings to finish," Jared told the piece of paper. Steve, who had handed it over, laughed at him.

"This must be the first time ever that you're going to pass up the chance to take up space in Christian's bar, eat his food, and drink his wine."

"I didn't say I wasn't going to meet her. Just that I have work to do."

"That kid came by earlier, the one whose honor Jensen protected. Anton, right? He was looking for you."

"Did you tell him where to find me?"

"I wasn't here. Christian told him you usually come for dinner. So you might see him tomorrow too."

When Jared and Jensen showed up at the bar the next night to meet Danneel, they discovered that Anton had been there for nearly forty minutes already, talking to Christian and Steve about Buffalo Bill and music and America and Montmartre. He'd even engaged the nameless poet (who seemed to have taken up semi-permanent residence in a corner) in a conversation about love and sex and poetry.

"That boy is crazy," Christian muttered to Jared, while Jensen collected Anton and steered him to a table. "He won't stop pestering you for anything." The poet didn't seem at all bothered by the boy's attentions, but he also went right back to work after Jensen pulled Anton away.

Jensen had told Jared that he was having a hard time writing anything, and now Jared felt a brief pang for his writer's block.

"He's okay," Jared said. "We're a whole new world to him. He thinks we're exciting."

"He thinks half the girls at the Green Door are in love with him."

Jared glanced over at Anton, who was gesturing at Jensen's eye, and grinned. He was a good kid - well-mannered, enthusiastic, excited, and so far completely judgement- and prejudice free. He had an innocent face and Jared wondered idly how Anton's parents would feel about him modeling for a penniless painter. He guessed Anton would be all for it. "Maybe they are."

Danneel showed up not three minutes later, surprisingly trailed by Sandy and Genevieve.

"Jensen! Your eye!" was the first thing she said. "What happened?"

"He rescued me from someone who thought I was for rent," Anton explained.

"I saved his honor," Jensen said. "It looks a lot worse than it is."

"Well, it looks painful."

"I don't want to talk about it, if that's okay. I wasn't expecting to see you girls," he said to Sandy and Genevieve. "It's nice that you could join us."

"I sent a message to the Green Door yesterday," Danneel explained, as they arranged themselves around the table. "To ask if they wanted to come."

"You don't have to work?" Anton asked.

"Not tonight." Sandy grinned at him. Jared wasn't entirely sure, but he thought the kid blushed.

They passed the time as they usually did in the Cherokee - talking, laughing, drinking, eating. Jared looked around the place, at Christian behind the bar chatting with the poet and a couple of shabbily-dressed but friendly men, at Steve tuning his violin (and he must have been in a good mood, because Jared hadn't heard him play for weeks), at Danneel sitting half across Genevieve's lap in the booth where they moved for some privacy, Genevieve's hand tangled in her hair as they kissed, at Sandy teasing Anton across the table and laughing at his shocked and delighted expression, at Jensen staring pensively at nothing, half-full wineglass by his hand and half-smoked cigarette between his lips - at his friends, his loved ones, the people who made his life in Paris so very worthwhile. He leaned sideways and kissed Jensen on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Jensen asked, taking the opportunity to tap the ash off the end of his cigarette.

"No reason," Jared said. "I'm just really happy, that's all."

Jensen smiled at him, kissed him on the mouth, and said "Do you want to go dancing?"

"Now? Where?"

"I don't know. We'll find a place. We could go to the Green Door. Or the Moulin de la Galette."

"The Green Door might be weird." He nodded in Sandy's direction. She was giggling at something Anton had said. "We could do it here." He thought. "We could go home."

"Why?"

"We can bring some food and some wine and ask the Hodges if we can have a party in their studio." He thought about that for a minute. "No, we'll suggest Edwin roll the piano into our studio and we'll have the party in our place. We'll invite all the girls from the Green Door. They'll have to close the place. Anton can come too. We can celebrate my getting into an exhibition. It will be fun."

"You're crazy," Jensen said, smiling, laughing, and Jared looked at him and thought he was the most beautiful man who ever lived.

I must be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch alive, Jared thought. He had good friends, a gorgeous and supportive boyfriend, a dealer for his art. He hadn't sold anything yet, he hadn't even shown anything yet, his gorgeous and supportive boyfriend hadn't had any luck either, he had no money, he lived in a drafty, leaky, unstable building, he couldn't see his family, he was hungry for artistic success and his mother's cooking, but he was in Paris, and he was in Paris with people he loved, and that made the hardships worth it.



The Salon of Nine

Jared thought Jensen had gone to the Green Door to fill in for the piano player again - the night he showed up with a black eye, no one seemed to care, and the regular piano player had hurt his hand - but Jared thought he had too much work to do to stay and watch the show. He was alone in the studio sitting on a stool sketching shadows by candlelight when Jensen finally came home and draped himself across Jared's shoulders.

"Where were you?" Jared asked. "Have you been at the Green Door this whole time?"

"That's tomorrow. Sebastian asked me to model for him."

"And you did?" Jared tried to turn so he could look Jensen in the face. His eye was still bruised, but not nearly as badly as it had been. Jensen had always been so adamant about not posing for Jared, so why would he do it for someone else?

"He paid me." Jensen shrugged. Jared wondered how much Sebastian paid his models. "He's trying to get into an exhibition so he's painting everything he can think of. He dressed me up as a fishmonger." He chuckled. "I had to hold a stuffed fish and wear clogs. I looked ridiculous. A couple of girls came over - prostitutes, pretty girls - we had some drinks, then we had some more drinks, then I left. You wouldn't make me wear clogs and hold a dead fish, would you?"

"No. You know I just want to paint you being yourself."

Jensen sat back on his heels, then lost his balance and fell on the floor. "I think I had too much to drink. It wasn't even good wine." He managed to get to his knees and leaned forward so he could rest his arms on Jared's drawing board and look at Jared's face. The candlelight flickered over his flushed cheeks, his heavy-lidded eyes. "I want to fuck you," he said conversationally. He pulled the drawing board away and leaned on Jared's thighs. "I want to - just - I want you. I'm a little drunk, but I really - " He pushed himself to his feet, using Jared's thighs for leverage. "Sebastian has his two girls, but I have you. You're better. You're worth all of them. You're a better painter." He pulled at Jared's shirt. "Come to bed. Take your clothes off so I can fuck you."

"What a romantic you are," Jared said, grinning. He stood, pulled off his shirt, tossed it on the stool. "Is this better?"

Jensen pulled his face down and kissed him in answer. It was a slow, deep kiss, for all that Jensen had seemed to be in a hurry. He tasted like wine, and not very good wine at that – Sebastian must not know the right people from whom he could acquire decent wine on a painter's income – but his tongue was insistent and his lips were soft and he had just enough stubble to scratch at Jared's face in an exciting kind of way.

Then he pulled back, licked his lips, took off his clothes – stumbling a little as he tried to get his shoes and then his pants off – and dragged Jared over to the bed. They left the candles on the little table where Jared had put them for the best light to sketch by. Jared knew they would have all burned down to puddles in the morning and he hated having to buy more so soon, but right now, with Jensen's mouth on him and Jensen's hand teasing him and the candles' fluttering light making them both appear ghostly and mysterious, he couldn't bring himself to care.

Jensen was a leisurely lover, and he spread Jared's legs and pushed inside him slowly, rolling against him like a ship bobbing on a gentle sea. He watched Jared as they moved together, faint shadows flickering across his skin, his mouth half open as he moaned softly and breathed Jared's name. His breath was warm and damp on Jared's face, his mouth turning up at the corners when Jared answered with his own moans and murmured words.

It seemed to take Jensen a long time to climax, and Jared held back in anticipation. He liked this version of his boyfriend – the slow, quiet, easy lover who moaned Jared's name and whispered nonsense against his lips, who could come out and say exactly what he wanted, and then unselfconsciously take the lead and guide them both. Jared ran his hands up and down Jensen's back, cupped his ass, stroked his arms, anything to keep from taking his own cock in hand and encouraging his own climax. He liked the way he could feel his orgasm building in his spine and the back of his neck and in his balls. He liked the pressure of holding it in. And he wanted Jensen to come first, wanted to see Jensen's pleasure in the tension of his face and hear it in the stuttering of his voice and smell it in the heat of his skin.

Jensen's gaze was fixed on Jared's face, his eyes dark and half-closed, crinkling at the corners when he smiled. It made Jared's heart race, the way Jensen concentrated on him, the way Jensen moved inside him and touched his face and brushed a hand through his hair. Jensen was beautiful in the dying light of the candles, their shadows on his skin hiding the length of his muscles and the shape of his bones, disguising the body that Jared knew and loved.

Finally Jensen started to move faster, his hips jerking as he groaned and came. Jared let himself go as well, his hand stuttering on his cock while Jensen watched his face.

"Jared," Jensen murmured, "Jared, Jared - "

"What? What?" Jared's voice was quiet as well.

"Nothing. I don't know. You're better than Sebastian."

"What, in bed?" Jared couldn't help but tease.

"Why would I – did you think - " Jensen's eyebrows drew together. He looked almost hurt.

"Shit, no. Why would you fuck him when you have me?" Jared pulled Jensen down to lie next to him. Jensen rolled onto his side, dragging Jared's arm across his chest and that way dragging Jared with him. "I was teasing you. We have different styles, that's all."

"No. You're a better painter. A better artist."

"But you won't model for me."

"Don't have to." His voice was barely a whisper.

"Don't yell at me when I paint you, then." There was no answer. Jared pressed his lips to Jensen's shoulder and fell asleep.



Jared's first exhibition was known as the Salon of Nine for the nine artists (eight painters and a sculptor) being shown. Misha had sent him an invitation to the opening, which arrived at the Cherokee in a heavy cream-colored envelope fairly reeking of class and money, much to Christian's amusement. The invitation was elaborately designed and beautifully colored and printed on stiff textured paper, and Jensen pinned it to the wall over his and Jared's bed, so they would always be able to see it before they went to sleep.

That night Jensen made Jared come twice before they took a break to eat the celebratory tart that Christian had bought them, and then Jared paid him back with interest. It felt like hours before they finally fell asleep, sweaty and exhausted and profoundly satisfied. In the morning Jared woke to the sound of someone singing, and opened his eyes to see Jensen sitting cross-legged on his side of the bed, rolling a cigarette and singing under his breath. He didn't seem to notice that Jared was awake, so Jared took the time to just admire him, his freckles, his strong profile, his chest, his arms, his thighs (and here Jared imagined the slight bow to Jensen's legs that his sitting position disguised, and the feel of those thighs wrapped around him as he thrust deeper and harder and drove Jensen to climax), the ginger-brown hair on his calves. Jared watched his nimble fingers sprinkle tobacco across a cigarette paper, roll it, lick it closed.

Then Jensen seemed to feel Jared's eyes on him, because he dropped his gaze, stilled his hands, and blushed.

"Stop it," he murmured.

"Stop what?" Jared asked.

"Stop staring at me."

"I can't help it. Just look at you." Jared sat up and turned Jensen's face to look at him. "You're so beautiful. I'm so lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it." But Jensen was smiling, just a little bit. He hated being stared at, and he kept refusing to model for even a sketch, but he loved Jared – he'd come to Paris for Jared – and being told that Jared felt lucky to have him clearly pleased him.

"I could've met someone else, the day I met you. I could've met Chad."

"You did meet Chad." Jensen grinned.

"No, we met – " Jensen's grin widened at Jensen's evident amusement at the memory of their first meeting. "You dick, you're thinking about him knocking me into the mud, aren't you."

"Hey, you laughed. From such things are friendships born."

"Friendships and really great sex." He leaned closer and kissed Jensen's mouth. Jensen's lips were wet from licking his cigarette closed, and they parted easily for Jared's tongue.

"Wait," Jensen murmured after a minute, pulling away so he could move his tobacco and rolling papers and the finished cigarette off the bed. "Now where were we?"

"You were picturing me with mud all over my Sunday clothes – I had mud in my hair! – and I was thinking that you were the most gorgeous man I've ever met and I want to paint you so everyone else can see what I see when I look at you."

"You know the answer to that."

"You're in *The Bed*."

Jensen shrugged. "Who's going to see that?"

"Misha wants it for the exhibition."

"Okay."

Jared blinked, surprised. "Are you saying you'll let me show it? I thought – "

"It's one of the best things you've done," Jensen said simply. "You want to show your best work, right? Don't make a big deal out of it or I'll change my mind. Just don't sell it."

"I won't. I promise. I'll make Misha put a little sign on it that says 'Not for sale, property of artist's boyfriend'." He grinned. Jensen rolled his eyes. "What's 'Not for sale' in French?"

"'A vendre' is 'for sale'.... 'Vendu' is 'sold'. Close enough. Write 'If I sell it he won't ever touch me again!'" He pulled Jared close and said something in his ear that he couldn't understand, but from the tone of Jensen's voice, Jared figured it was something hot and obscene.

"Are you telling me you want to fuck me?" he asked, still grinning and feeling himself starting to get hard.

"I'm telling you I want *you* to fuck *me*," Jensen answered, his voice low and throaty. "I want to feel you

hard and full inside my ass." He reached for Jared's growing erection. "You really need to learn French faster. It's not as much fun if I have to keep translating for you."

But there were some things that needed no translation, as Jared demonstrated by pushing Jensen down on the bed and reaching into his undershorts. They rubbed against each other, their kisses deep and hungry, but Jensen had only just wriggled out of his shorts when Jared's stomach growled. Jensen laughed, attacked Jared's jaw and throat with his tongue and teeth, and Jared's stomach growled again, louder and more insistent. Jared could feel Jensen laughing against his throat.

"I'm sorry," Jared said.

"S okay," Jensen told him. He pushed Jared away and slid off the bed to get dressed. "We'll go to the Cherokee and wake Christian and Steve and make them buy us breakfast."

"Christian will tell us he just bought me a tart and why does he have to keep feeding us, now that I have a dealer and a show." He sat up so he could watch Jensen pull on his clothes and comb his hair. Jensen turned and cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Are you going to make me go out and find food for you? Didn't you ever ask Misha for an advance?"

"He paid for all my paints and brushes and a bunch of new canvases. I don't get any money until he sells something, until I can prove that I'm sellable. The Salon's in a week and a half. I'll sell something then and I can pay Christian back. I'll go into every butchery and bakery and grocery in Montmartre, and I'll buy eggs and bacon and pain au chocolat, and I'll make you fried eggs and more bacon than you can handle. I'll bring you breakfast in bed every morning for a month." Jensen's eyebrow rose a little higher. "I can cook!"

"Uh-huh. Come on – " He threw a shirt at Jared's head, – "put on some clothes so we can go feed the beast."

The Salon of Nine was held in the Galerie Sheppard because it was larger than Misha's gallery, and it was (as far as Jared could tell) well-attended. There were four other non-French exhibitors with whom Jared could actually have a conversation – a sweet, goofy American from Massachusetts, an Englishman with a slightly crazed look and a well-behaved pitbull on a leash, a Russian girl who spoke no English but who tried valiantly to talk to him anyway, and the one sculptor, who was also American and had come with two friends, a man and a woman, all of whom Jared decided were sleeping together.

Jensen tried to act as translator between Jared and the four French exhibitors and the Russian painter, but when their conversation turned technical he had to admit defeat, because he just didn't know enough of the vocabulary.

"Don't worry about it," Jared told him. "I can ask Misha. You're here, that's all I care about."

"What kind of boyfriend would I be if I missed your first exhibition?" Jensen said. He grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and handed it to Jared, who had already drained his first glass.

"Cheers."

They met Mr and Mrs B, Danneel's employers, who seemed pleased to finally meet Jared. They met an American couple, a Mr Morgan - "Please, call me Jeff" - and his pretty wife, who owned a gallery in

San Francisco and spent half the year in Europe looking for new and interesting art to bring home. They met Mr B's friend Robert, another American, short and frenetic and wildly friendly, and a Mr Worthy and a Mr and Mrs Whitfield and a Ms Rhodes and a Mr Chau, who was younger than Jared and who turned out to be a student and Mr Sheppard's protégé. He insisted Jared and Jensen call him by his first name, which was Osric which sounded medieval to Jared, prompting him to ask if Osric had ever modeled for anyone and what did he think about posing as a medieval knight for a painting?

"A Pre-Raphaelite kind of thing?" Osric asked. "The Pre-Raphaelites are a little, uh – "

"Passé, I know," Jared interrupted. "I have a more modern style. Maybe something more Byzantine? You saw the poster for Bernhardt's *Gismonda*." Of course he had – everyone had. Jared and Jensen hadn't even come to Paris yet when the opera opened, and even they knew that it was such a popular poster that people had cut them off the signboards in the middle of the night. "Something like that. But different."

"I've started the Cours Mucha at the Académie Colorossi." Osric looked proud of himself and Jared was momentarily envious – Alphons Mucha, who had designed Sarah Bernhardt's famous theft-inspiring poster, was teaching drawing lessons at the Académie, and his success had made his classes hard to get into. "I have to ask Mr Sheppard if I can take the time but I'd love to model for you. I've only ever posed for other students. Painting your friends is cheaper than hiring models," he added conspiratorially.

"Who do you think is in all my work?" Jared grinned and gestured first to Jensen and then to a drawing of the Cherokee that was hanging on the wall right behind them. It showed Christian at the bar and strangers at the tables and Jensen off to the right, writing in his notebook and smoking a cigarette. Osric looked from one to the other, nodding his head in understanding. Jared glanced at Jensen, who was trying to avoid Osric's gaze, and surreptitiously took his hand.

Mr Sheppard called Osric away, and as soon as he was out of earshot, Jared whispered "I didn't mean to embarrass you, I'm sorry," in Jensen's ear.

"Just wait until someone wants to talk to you about *The Bed*," Jensen said drily.

"You said I could show it."

"I know. People seem to like it."

"Of course they do. They can tell how much the painter loves the person in it." He leaned in and kissed Jensen on the cheek, and then Mr B and his friend Robert swooped down on them to talk about Jared's paintings of Genevieve and Sandy and the other girls from the Green Door, and Jensen excused himself and went off to find a slightly quieter place from which to admire the art.

It seemed that Jared met more people that night than he'd met since he and Jensen had first come to Paris. He would have thought that most of the attendees would be French, but no – he met Americans and Brits and a couple of Russians (which didn't surprise him, considering Misha) and people whose accents and name origins he couldn't place and who didn't bother to tell him where they were from. He met an aspiring opera singer who told him to call her Alona and by the end of the evening he'd convinced her to model for him. He'd had a plan to paint the four seasons – he'd already asked Sandy and Genevieve to model for *Spring* and *Autumn* – and thought she would be perfect for *Summer*. He

just needed to convince Danneel to model for *Winter*.

Misha even introduced him to a Monsieur Dupuis, who had come to possibly review the exhibition for *La Plume*. Jared tried very hard to make a good impression and not say anything stupid, but he'd had champagne and was too excited to control his tongue. Monsieur Dupuis spoke English well enough, but Jared didn't know nearly enough French, and Misha had to translate a few times when they realized they couldn't make themselves adequately understood to each other. Jared looked around for Jensen, even though Misha had the artistic vocabulary that Jensen didn't, because Jensen had more experience making him sound intelligent and articulate in French. But Jensen was standing off in a corner talking to the English painter with the pitbull, and Jared didn't have the heart to drag him away.

He knew that as much as Jensen had wanted to come with him, and as much as he wanted Jensen to come, this wasn't Jensen's idea of a good time. He wasn't comfortable in crowds of people he didn't know. He didn't like being the focus of attention when conversation turned to *The Bed* or the drawing of the Cherokee or the ways Jared found his models. Jared knew that Jensen was proud of him and would support him in any way possible – he'd already given Jared more support and encouragement than anyone, and his occasional gigs filling in for the piano player at the Green Door helped pay the rent and keep them in bread and cheese – and he couldn't help telling people *This is Jensen, my boyfriend and partner in crime, he's wonderful and beautiful and I love him very much*.

Jensen blushed every time, but he looked pleased at Jared's words.

Three people offered to buy *The Bed*, despite the discreet card that said it wasn't for sale. Jared had asked Misha to swear not to sell it - "My boyfriend will kill me, I painted it for him, he won't even model for me and he hates the idea that someone will have a painting of him in bed hanging in their house" - and Misha kept his promise, even as collectors approached him – and then Jared – with potential prices. They all walked away disappointed.

Jared accepted compliments on his work from the other painters and the sculptor, and both he and Jensen gave out compliments in return. Jensen reported that he heard the sculptor's long-faced male friend comment "Thank heaven for little girls" about some of the Russian painter's pretty nudes – although he could have been talking about the Russian painter herself, because she was young and pretty and girlish – and the sculptor's female friend smacked him on the arm and laughingly called him a pervert.

It was a long night but it didn't feel that long, because Jared was among interesting, chatty people who wanted to talk about him and about art and about Paris. And Jensen was there with him, in the gallery if not always right at his side, and Jared could show him off and tell people he was a writer and a playwright and just as talented in his chosen career.

They stayed until the gallery closed for the night and some of the painters went to the sculptor's studio to talk and drink some more. The American from Massachusetts, who said his name was Chris, had brought a sketchpad to the exhibition, and they spent an hour passing it around and adding to each others' drawings, until the sculptor kicked them all out. The sculptor's lady friend – Emily, she reminded Jared, when he thanked her by way of calling her the wrong name – managed to catch a carriage outside and put him and Jensen in it, and as it bounced away Jared turned Jensen's face towards his and kissed him and said "Thank you" and "I love you" and "That was amazing."

"You're amazing," Jensen answered. "I heard you telling people about my writing."

"I didn't want them to think I was the only talented person in the relationship. They should know. Maybe someone will want to see something of yours too."

"Maybe." He squeezed Jared's thigh. "I'm so proud of you."

"I drank too much and I think I said something stupid to someone. But I sold paintings. I sold my work, Jensen. People bought it." It didn't feel real. He hoped he wasn't going to wake up in the morning and discover that no one had bought anything, that he'd imagined it because he'd had too much champagne.

"I knew they would." Jensen's mouth was warm on his and Jared's lips parted for his tongue and they kissed in silence the rest of the way home.

Jensen had to take the key from Jared to get the front door open, and they made their way across the floor of the studio and around the screen and onto the bed, kicking off shoes and dropping clothes as they went. Jensen pulled off the duvet and flopped onto the mattress, pulling Jared down with him. Jared fit himself against Jensen's back, wrapped his arm around Jensen's chest, reached for his hand and laced their fingers together.

He was excited, so excited, at his success and the way he'd talked to people and the way they had talked to him, but he was too drunk and too tired to do more than just lie here with his arm around his wonderful boyfriend and enjoy the afterglow of his evening.

"I sold paintings," he said wonderingly. "Four. No, two, and two drawings. One of the Bois, *The Black Stockings*, that drawing of the Cherokee." He tried to remember the fourth. "*Stonemasons at Lunch*. People wanted *The Bed*. They loved you." He pressed his lips to Jensen's neck, breathed in the scent of warm skin and sweat and cigarette smoke. The English painter was a chain smoker, and Jensen had spent some time talking and smoking with him. "Someone wanted *Sandy at the Mirror*. But for less."

"For less than what?" Jensen asked.

"What Misha was asking. They tried to deal. Why would anyone lowball? Pay less to see Sandy's lovely profile every day. We got to meet the Bs."

"Bees? Oh, Danneel's employers."

"He's tall. They're all tall. Not as tall as me, but."

"No one is." Jared could hear the grin in Jensen's voice.

"I can pay Christian back for all his, his. His wine. And when he fed us. So he can stop bugging me now. The sculptor and his friends, there's three of them. Would you – what if there were three of us?"

"What do you mean?" Jensen yawned.

"I think they're a trio. Not just a couple. Don't you think?"

"I guess. But why would I want a third? I have my hands full with you." Jensen yawned again. "What

time is it?" he asked.

"Dunno. Late. We were there 'til it closed. We should take the girls. And Christian and Steve. Show me hanging from the walls." Jared smiled against Jensen's shoulder, remembering the thrill of being able to see his paintings hanging in a gallery, the thrill of watching strangers admire his work, his friends, his boyfriend, his neighborhood. "Three people wanted to buy *The Bed*. Did I tell you?"

"No. You didn't – "

"I didn't sell it. I promised." His arm tightened across Jensen's chest. "I met a reviewer. He might write about the exhibition for *La Plume*. I could be in *La Plume*. His English was pretty good but Misha had to translate some. You were talking to, to. The English painter. With the dog."

"Tom."

"Him. I wanted you to be my translator. You would've made me sound smart."

Jensen snorted in disbelief.

"No, I think I sounded stupid," Jared went on, trying to remember his conversation with Monsieur Dupuis. "I had champagne and I was so excited, I mean my first review. And *La Plume* is a big deal to me. I don't know what I said." His arm tightened against Jensen's chest and he nuzzled against Jensen's shoulder. "I love you so much. Did you know that? You know that."

"I know that." Jensen's voice was soft.

"Good. I'm so glad you were there. With me. Everyone could meet you and you were charming, and they could all see what I see. Not just *The Bed*. All of you."

"You're going to be so hungover in the morning."

"I don't care. I sold paintings. I got to, to, I talked about art and Paris. And Montmartre. And Texas, someone asked about the Alamo. Do you believe that? The Alamo. You were, I don't know where you were. And me, people asked about me. There was some really good work there. Even if I couldn't talk to half the painters. It was a good night. I had a good night."

"I'm glad."

"What if I sell everything?"

"You'll paint more."

"We could move. We could. To a, a better place, one that doesn't leak. With thicker walls. With the money I could make. In Montmartre, though. We can't leave the girls or Christian. Or Steve. Or Anton, but he'd just follow us."

"He'll want to see your exhibition too," Jensen said.

"We'll all go. We'll take everyone."

"I'm really proud of you. I know I said that already, but I think it bears repeating. I'm proud of you and I love you."

"I know, I know," Jared murmured. He was so tired suddenly. He just wanted to close his eyes and sleep. "I always knew that. I wouldn't be here without you. I couldn't - " He yawned. "I couldn't."

Maybe Jensen said something else. He couldn't tell. He fell asleep.



Madame B

Two noteworthy things happened in the week following the exhibition opening - Jared got his first commission, to paint Mrs B's portrait, and Jensen got a packet from his parents. It came to the Cherokee, because all their mail did, and Christian handed it over with the comment that Jensen should be lucky it hadn't been opened, because it was in a bigger envelope than Jensen's usual letters from home, and Christian was curious.

Jensen could have opened the envelope there, he told Jared later, but he waited until he was back at the studio where there was privacy.

"What does it say?" Jared asked, leaning over Jensen's shoulder to read the letter. Jensen flapped it against his chest for privacy. "An old boyfriend wants you back? An old girlfriend?" Jared rested his chin on Jensen's shoulder, grinning, and Jensen put his hand flat against Jared's face and shoved him off.

"My sister's getting married," he said, his voice a mix of surprised, baffled, and pleased.

"When?"

"About a month from now." Jensen pulled a folded piece of paper out of the envelope, shook it open, and scanned it. "My parents booked me on a ship to New Orleans. I just have to get myself to Le Havre to meet it." Folded inside the piece of paper were another two slips. "And train tickets from New Orleans to Dallas." He turned and handed the whole package to Jared. "I think I'm going home."

"They must really want you at Mackenzie's wedding," Jared commented. From the dates on the train tickets and the receipt from the travel agency, it looked as if Jensen would be gone a month. No, more than a month – almost six weeks, including ocean travel and travel between Le Havre and Paris. At least his parents hadn't also made arrangements for a couple of extra days in New Orleans, aside from the time between disembarking from the ship and getting on the train, or vice versa. "You'll be gone six weeks. What am I going to do without you for six weeks?"

"Maybe I can borrow the money for your passage too."

"I wouldn't expect your folks to pay for me to go to the wedding."

"No, but – "

"Jensen, it's okay. Mac's only going to get married once. You should be there. See your family. Eat someone else's cooking. It'll be fun." He tried to sound encouraging and accepting. He didn't want Jensen to hear the anxiety in his voice. They'd never been apart that long.

"You'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Will you?"

"I won't have to worry about anyone hogging the blankets or rolling on top of me in the middle of the night." Jensen grinned. "It might be nice to have a whole bed to myself. And to be honest I miss my mom's pie."

Jared gave him back the train tickets and the receipt for the ship and the letter from his parents. Jensen stuffed everything back into the envelope.

"I don't have to leave for a week and a half," he went on. "I should figure out how to get to Le Havre, though. And get a wedding present. Can I give them a painting?"

"What, one of mine?"

"No, one of Sebastian's. Of course one of yours!"

"What, though? I can't paint the happy couple – I don't know what Mac's fiancé looks like. I don't even know what she looks like any more. The last time I saw her was, what, five years ago?"

"Mom sent me a photo." Jensen pulled it out of the envelope and handed it over. Jared squinted at it. The photography studio had mounted the photo inside an oval cardboard frame. It showed Mackenzie in a light-colored formal gown and with her hair pinned up, looking serious. Jared thought he might be able to find a model of the same height and shape who he could drape in something approximating a wedding dress so he'd have a body on which to copy Mac's face, but it wouldn't be a painting of her own wedding dress, and he couldn't put her fiancé in the picture with her.

"What about a painting of Paris?" he asked. "The Bois de Boulogne in the summer. Maybe the Tuileries." The formal gardens didn't interest him as much as the untamed parts of the Bois, but he'd happily paint their ordered paths and well-trimmed shrubbery if that's what Mackenzie wanted. "There's the puppet show at the Jardin du Luxembourg, but she can see puppet shows anywhere. I could paint the Moulin de la Galette from the street – would she think a windmill was quaint? Is the beer garden at the Moulin Rouge too scandalous?"

"It's not as scandalous as a show at the Moulin Rouge. Or the Green Door. There's the Opera, the Louvre, the Champs-Élysées.... Notre-Dame? Or the Seine? I don't know. I think she'd like a scene with people in it, not just a landscape or a building. You'll think of something."

"I could give her a painting of you." Jared grinned brightly.

"You're never going to stop asking me to model for you, are you?"

"You modeled for Sebastian."

"He paid me. And he doesn't see me naked all the time. You can probably paint me from memory."

"I'll paint you in a nice suit and hat standing in front of the Galerie Sheppard, pointing through the door at the exhibition and all my work."

"You're funny."

"I know." Jared grinned. "There's a pink house on the other side of the butte, behind Sacré-Coeur. I'll put some tables on the sidewalk like it's a little cafe, and paint a couple sitting at one of them. Then she can see where you live, sort of."

"You may have to make Christmas paintings for my whole family after this," Jensen commented.

"I think I can handle that."

The next morning Jared took a walk up and over the butte and through the never-ending construction site of the basilica to make some preliminary sketches of the pink house, and then he headed out to see Mrs B about her portrait.

The Bs lived in the 6th Arrondissement, which was the same kind of posh neighborhood that Misha lived in. It was classier and cleaner and flatter than Montmartre, much nicer and no doubt safer. There were no leaning pink houses on these streets, no crooked wooden buildings, and certainly no cabarets where the dancers flung their skirts over their heads. But it was a lovely neighborhood all the same, with its even streets and well-tended sidewalks and healthy trees and brick and stone buildings with beautiful iron scrollwork balconies, and Jared felt both soothed and out of place as he strolled down the sidewalk with his easel under one arm and his paintbox in his other hand, looking for the Bs' house.

A maid answered the door and had him wait in the foyer while she fetched Madame, just as he'd done when he went to Misha's house to sign his contract. The foyer floor was all black and white marble squares, the walls were painted pale yellow, and the stairs curving up to the second floor had white marble steps and a wrought-iron railing. Against the wall near the stairs was a small round table that held what looked like a couple of porcelain sheep and a vase of dark red roses. On either side of the table were two armless white chairs with padded oval backs. Everything was dusted and polished to a mirror surface. Jared was a little afraid to put anything down. He didn't even want to sit.

He hadn't been waiting long when Mrs B herself came to get him. She was wearing a cream-colored dress printed with pale green sprays of leaves, and her hair was twisted up into a bun. She introduced herself as Mrs Bettany – and now he knew what the B stood for – kissed him on both cheeks in the French fashion, and took him through the house to the back, to a pretty, airy room painted a darker yellow than the foyer and with tall glass doors leading to the garden. The garden surrounded the stone patio on three sides, all the greenery looking overgrown and wild in a way that Jared knew was intentional. It looked too much like the deliberately untamed parts of the Bois de Boulogne. A tree he couldn't immediately identify spread its branches over a round table and four chairs, which Jared guessed were made of wrought iron, painted white. There was a bicycle leaning against the tree trunk.

"Do you like my garden?" Mrs B asked. "It's no substitute for meadows and woods, but Paul let me fill it with as many American and English plants as will grow here, and it's a lovely place to sit. Come, I'll show you." She opened the glass doors and ushered Jared outside. He was still carrying his folding easel and paintbox, because no one had told him where to put them down.

It was warm out but part of the garden was in shade, protected by the walls surrounding it, and Mrs B pointed out pale green dogwoods and a magnolia with glossy dark leaves and a hydrangea with huge globes of purple-blue flowers, black-eyed susans and multicolored gerbera daisies and a dwarf maple tree and columbines and a stand of bamboo disguising a wall and four varieties of roses and strawberry plants in terra-cotta pots.

There was no statuary and nothing but growing things, aside from the bicycle and the white wrought iron furniture and a mossy stone birdbath with a mossy stone nymph standing on its rim beyond the far end of the patio.

"The strawberries are Paul's," Mrs B said. "They remind him of home. I tried to grow raspberries, but raspberries can't be tamed and we had to rip them out. They would've taken over the entire garden." Jared wondered how anyone would be able to tell, since even now it looked as if every plant was encroaching on the soil of its neighbor like a sweet-smelling invading army. Mrs B gestured to one of the white chairs. "Please, have a seat. Put your things down." Jared did so. "I'll tell you what I want you to paint, and then you can give me your opinion."

Jared was glad that they'd already discussed the money. He'd had to ask Misha for advice because he didn't want to demand too much or settle for too little, but since they'd gotten it out of the way already they could get right to business.

"Do you want me to paint you in the garden?" Jared asked, looking around. It was quiet except for the chirping of birds and the buzz of an occasional bee. So different from Montmartre, he thought. More civilized.

He wasn't quite sure he could live this orderly, polished, elegant life, even if he could afford it, but it was nice to be able to visit.

Mrs B was smiling at him, clearly pleased. "You read my mind," she said. "I love my garden. Paul has an ancestral house back in England, near Durham, with acres and acres of land that he's let grow wild. He had the caretaker ship the birdbath over, in fact." She gestured to the stone basin sitting in the grass surrounded by black-eyed susans and tiny pink flowers Jared didn't recognize. "I love it there. We don't get to see it often, though, so I have to content myself with my garden here and the public gardens of Paris. Miss Harris told me you met in the Bois de Boulogne. It's a fantastic place, isn't it?"

Jared studied her face while she talked. She had dramatic dark eyebrows and green eyes and a straight nose and a lovely oval face, and she must have spent time outside because her skin was lightly tanned. He guessed the bicycle was hers. She looked healthy, and sitting in her garden with the tree reaching over her head, she looked happy. He'd paint her here, sitting in one of her white wrought-iron garden chairs, maybe arranging flowers or tree branches, with the giant puffball hydrangea behind her.

She agreed with everything he said, except that she didn't want to be the entire focus of the painting. "And I'm not sure I want the table. Can you do some sketches from different angles, and then we can make a decision?"

"Sure." His easel folded around a box in which he could put canvases or a sketchbook, and he had to lay it out on the paving stones of the patio to open it up. Mrs B watched, interested, as he unpacked his sketchbook and flipped open his paintbox to find a good charcoal pencil.

"Put your chair over there to start," she said, gesturing to other side of the patio, "and I'll ring for some lemonade."

He spent a pleasant few hours behind the Bs' house, sketching Mrs B and her garden from different angles, painting quick little studies to get a feel for the colors of the trees and flowers, drinking lemonade, eating little tea sandwiches, and chatting.

"Miss Harris tells me you've seen my friend Gina walking Malcolm," Mrs B said.

"Is she the woman with the ocelot?"

"She is. Malcolm was a gift from her husband. At the time he was away traveling a lot, and he was worried for her safety when she went out alone." Mrs B chuckled. "I thought he was being over-cautious – she's such a tall, imposing woman, and she has friends and a maid to go out with her, and who would attack her? But she told me that was exactly the problem, that men lash out when they're intimidated, as if they need to prove they're still men. The way dogs bite when they're afraid." She shrugged.

Mrs B wasn't especially tall – she was certainly shorter than the woman with the ocelot – but she had a presence. Jared had gotten the impression from Danneel that if Mr B was going to be out of town for weeks at a time, Mrs B and the little Bs either went with him or went to visit him wherever he was. She wasn't on her own so much that she'd need protection.

He remembered that Mrs B would have seen his painting of the Bois de Boulogne at the Salon of Nine, so of course she already knew that he'd seen her friend and her ocelot. So why was she acting as if she'd only heard it from Danneel?

"Would, um – "

"Madame Fishburne," Mrs B volunteered helpfully.

He was relieved. He couldn't call her the Queen of Sheba in front of Mrs B. "Would Madame Fishburne mind that I painted her when she wasn't looking?"

"I don't think so. Anyone who knows her would know she was the woman in your painting, but her face is hidden, so to any onlooker she could be anyone. And the Bois is a big place. I thought you captured her well. I told her and Laurence – her husband – they should see the exhibition." She smiled a pleased, sneaky smile. "I wanted her to commission you for a portrait."

Jared almost dropped his charcoal. He'd thought Mrs B had asked him to paint her portrait partly as a favor for Misha, although he also knew she just admired his work that much, and she and her husband were supporters of the arts and up-and-coming young artists. But Madame Fishburne (he still wanted to call her the Queen of Sheba) didn't owe him or Misha anything. If he got a commission from her, that would be due solely to his work. It would be all him.

He couldn't wait to go home and tell Jensen. Even though it wouldn't really mean anything to them, he couldn't wait to drop by the Cherokee and tell Christian and Steve that Mrs B had told the Queen of Sheba that he should paint her.

Well, it was moot until Madame Fishburne actually asked. And in the meantime, he already had a commission, and he needed to finish this quick study and show it to Mrs B so they could settle on the subject of her painting.

The weather cooperated and he went back the next day and the day after that to set up his easel behind the house and paint Mrs B in her garden. She was a pleasure to paint – she sat still when he asked, she talked to him when it okay for her to move. She asked him questions and didn't mind when he gave short answers. When he was painting, all that mattered was the subject in front of him and the paint on his canvas. He saw lavender-blue and dark shiny green and bright yellow and brown-black, ovals and circles and twisting lines, the gold of sunlight and the dimmed colors of the garden in shadow. He wasn't looking at a friendly, wealthy American woman or her white wrought-iron garden furniture or her magnolia tree or her wild hydrangea. He could work in complete silence, he could work in noise, he could work with the gentle murmur of the Bs' household around him.

He never saw Danneel, but he guessed she was keeping Baby B entertained elsewhere, so as not to disturb the painting in progress.

After three days he thought the portrait was far enough along that he could fix its flaws, add some details, and finish it in the studio, and Mrs B admired it and pronounced it perfect. She told Jared she would have someone bring his fee to Misha, and he could hang the painting in Misha's gallery until she came to collect it. She wanted other people to see it before she hid it away in her house.

"I know my garden's beautiful," she said, "and so does everyone who sees it, but now people who don't even know me can admire it. You even made me look good." She grinned at him.

"You were a great subject," he said. "It's been a wonderful experience."

"I'm glad to hear that. Thank you." And she kissed him on both cheeks and sent him on his way.

On Saturday Danneel came by the studio to admire the painting and tell Jared it was amazing and Mrs B had suggested to Mr B that they commission a family portrait. Then she explained she had to be back at the house for dinner, she couldn't stay, she was going to meet Genevieve for a little snack and a quick drink. Jared grinned as she ran out of the studio.

Jensen had been sitting at the table smoking and trying to write during this entire exchange, and after the door closed behind her, he turned to Jared and said "I remember when you told me she had a crush on her employer."

"She did," Jared said. "Genevieve's so much better for her, though." He tilted his head at the canvas on his easel – not Mrs B in her garden, but a painting of the Cherokee at a slow hour, showing Christian wiping down the bar, Steve tuning his fiddle, and Aldis and Edwin sitting at a table off to the side. He'd thought it was a good idea when he started it, but now he wasn't sure. It was a dark, quiet painting, a side of the Cherokee he really liked, but would it sell? He'd started one of the dressing room in the Green Door, showing some of the girls pinning up their hair and powdering their faces and

applying kohl around their eyes and rouge to their lips before a show. That might go better.

"I liked that one," Jensen commented, as Jared took the painting of the Cherokee off the easel and leaned it against the wall next to the couch.

"I don't think it's that good," Jared said absently. He rested the dressing room painting on the easel and stepped back to look at it. "This will be better."

"You could give it to Christian."

Jared shrugged. "He won't take it. He's only ever accepted one of my paintings." And that had been an east Texas landscape that Jared had painted from memory one winter day when he was feeling particularly homesick.

Jensen rolled another cigarette and scratched something out of whatever he was writing. "Your work is a lot better than you think," he said, almost absently.

"Trust me to know when a painting isn't working, Jensen. It's not that *I'm* no good. I know I'm good. But *it's* no good." He squeezed some carmine paint onto his palette and went to work on the girls in the dressing room.

Four days later Jensen went back to Texas. The night before his departure, the boys ate dinner at the Cherokee where Jensen said goodbye to Christian and Steve, went to the Green Door where he said goodbye to Sandy and Genevieve, and then went home where they kissed and touched and talked and took a great deal of time with their pleasure before wrapping themselves around each other and falling asleep.

At the Gare du Nord, while they waited for Jensen to be able to board, they held hands and surreptitiously stroked each other's wrists and Jared found himself wishing that the train would be delayed, so much so that Jensen would miss the ship to New Orleans, and he'd have to stay in Paris.

But no, it was on time and Jensen waited until the last minute to climb aboard. He took Jared's face in his hands and told him to be good, to eat and sleep and paint and see his friends, and not to worry.

"I'll see you in six weeks," he said. "It'll go by like nothing."

"It's forever," Jared said. He rested his forehead against Jensen's. "If I really hate sleeping alone – I'm going to hate sleeping alone – can I – "

"Ask Sandy. Maybe she'll keep you company. Or Genevieve." Jared could just see Jensen's grin. "At least she won't try to seduce you."

Jared chuckled despite himself.

"You'll be okay, Jared," Jensen went on, his voice quiet. "You'll have the girls and Christian and Steve and Danneel and the Hodges. Even Anton. And I'll be home with my family. Mac will love your painting." Jared had painted the pink house for her, but rather than dress it up as a little café, with tables on the sidewalk and a chalkboard on the wall, he'd left it as a house with green shutters and lilac creeping up the walls.

"I'll miss you."

"I know. I'll miss you too." They heard someone calling what Jared assumed was final boarding. "I have to go." Jensen kissed him quickly once, then a second time.

"I love you," Jared whispered.

"I know that too." Jensen grinned, kissed him a third time, and jumped on the train.

Jared went to the Cherokee, where he stayed until it was a good time to go to the Green Door, and he stayed there until they kicked him out. He asked Sandy if she would come home with him, just to sleep next to him, because he didn't want to be alone.

"Of course," she said. "I'll even buy you breakfast in the morning."

She slept curled against his back, despite the summer warmth of the studio, and she wasn't his boyfriend but she was his friend and she loved him, and considering it was his first night without Jensen in a long time, he actually slept pretty well.



The Four Seasons

He got his first letter a little over a week later. It had been written on the ship and posted after Jensen disembarked in New Orleans.

"I notice he didn't write me," Christian commented drily when he handed it over the bar of the Cherokee. "Didn't even send a postcard."

"He must love me more," Jared said, too distracted to really pay attention to what he was saying. Christian didn't answer. Jared took a seat at a corner table to read his mail.

Jared,

I have a tiny berth with barely any room for the bed and my bag, so I'm sitting on deck to write this. I apologize for the shaky handwriting; it's not very smooth sailing.

This will be a short note because I've already met someone and been challenged to a game of chess (I think Aldis would approve), but I want to remember to tell you that I miss you already but I'm excited to see my folks and to meet Mac's fiancé. I think the change of scene will help me write.

Tell everyone I said hello. I'd say kiss yourself from me, but you know I'd be imagining you doing more than kissing.

I love you,

J

"Well?" Steve called from across the bar. "Did he sink?"

"Shut up," Jared called back.

"So he made it home in one piece," Christian said. "Good to know."

That night Anton appeared at the studio, explaining that he'd gone to the Cherokee and Christian had sent him over and was Jared going to the Green Door and could he tag along, and where was Jensen?

"His sister's getting married," Jared told him. "He went home."

"Oh." Anton peered around the studio. Jared realized he'd never been inside, but of course he'd want to see it. In his mind this was probably where half the bohemian magic happened. "Where's home?"

"Dallas."

"Where's that?"

"Texas. Don't they teach you geography at your fancy private school?"

Anton shrugged. "Not American geography. It's a French school. They only care about France. I can name all the *départements*, their capitals and major industries, and explain how the government works and why Napoleon and Charlemagne were the greatest rulers ever." He gestured to the half-finished painting of Spring that was sitting on the easel. "Is that Sandy?"

"Yeah. I'm doing a series of the four seasons." He'd started the day after Jensen left, figuring that Sandy was in the studio already, so he might as well get her to model for him. "She's Spring. Genevieve said she'd pose for *Autumn* and I still need to convince Danneel to be Winter."

"Do you have a Summer?" He looked eager.

"An aspiring opera singer. It'll be the first time I've deliberately used a model I don't know for a major piece."

"Would you paint me?"

"Sure. I'll do one of the Green Door and put you in it." Jared grinned. Anton grinned back. "Your parents will know you've been sneaking out to be with crazy impoverished artists and dancing girls, though."

"They know already." He grabbed Jared's hand. "Come on. Maybe the girls will let me watch them get dressed."

Later, Anton's desire to be in one of Jared's paintings gave Jared an idea – what if he did another series of seasons, but this time using male models? He'd ask Aldis or Edwin to model for *Winter*. Christian

could be Autumn, Anton would sit for *Spring*, and he'd get Jensen to pose for *Summer*. Somehow.

It was a good thought. He had to make more progress on the current seasons, but once he'd finished them he could start preparing for the next set. He could even start asking his potential models now.

Jared had thought Jensen's absence would be a much bigger deal than it turned out to be. He still missed his boyfriend every night – and he'd asked Sandy a few more times to stay over, which she was glad to do partly because his bed was bigger than hers – but he had work to keep him busy. Misha asked for more paintings and wanted to know if Jared had thought about designing posters (he hadn't), and Jared worked on his four seasons. He worked on *Spring*, started *Autumn*, and tried to figure out how to convince Danneel to model for *Winter*.

When Genevieve came over one Saturday for her second modeling session – they'd spent half the first session looking at sketches and talking and sharing a bottle of wine – he realized he could use her. And she even brought it up herself, by asking if Danneel was coming by.

"She might. I asked her to." He'd hoped that he could finally persuade her to pose for *Winter* if he had Genevieve to help him. She was so close to agreeing and he just had a few details to fix on *Spring* and he was making good progress on *Autumn*.

"You know what some of the girls at the Green Door call me now?" Genevieve went on. "Le poisson d'avril."

"'Poisson' is 'fish', right? What's 'd'avril'?"

"De Avril. April. April fool." Oh. He knew that. Her expression and tone of voice indicated that she knew he knew it too. "Like Danneel's a joke the universe is playing on me." She sounded annoyed. "They call her 'le poisson d'or', the goldfish."

"Why?"

"Because she works for a wealthy family, I don't know. Because they think she has the attention span of a goldfish and she'll get tired of me." She managed to shrug without disrupting her pose. "It's been over a month. Just because we can't see each other all the time.... I wish we could, though."

"I think she does too."

"Emmanuelle had an admirer bring her flowers every day for almost three weeks, and then he just stopped coming. She hasn't seen him since. We told her not to sleep with him." Now Genevieve sounded almost smug.

"But you and Danneel – "

"Sort of. Mostly. She won't leave me, though." A pause, and she turned to look at him, breaking the pose, and now sounding a little worried. "She won't, will she?"

"Not because you slept together. But she doesn't want to lose her job. That's why she keeps refusing to model for me. She doesn't want Mr and Mrs B and their friends to see her hanging half-naked in Misha's gallery."

Genevieve laughed. "Good thing they don't know how she spends her days off, then."

Jared had a feeling that Mrs B might know, but he elected not to say anything. It was between her and Danneel, anyway.

"I told her to ask them first," he told Genevieve. He squinted at her, at the painting on his canvas, and at her again. He dropped his brush in the jar of water and picked up a different one. He'd found a sheaf of wheat for her to hold, and he needed to finish putting it on the canvas before it fell apart. "I said I'd paint her fully clothed."

"You can probably paint her from memory."

Which was exactly what Jensen had always said when Jared asked him to model for a painting. Jared was surprised he hadn't thought of it in relation to Danneel.

But she'd hate that he hadn't listened to her, that he hadn't respected her desire for privacy. And he didn't want to discover that she'd been right about losing her job if a painting of her turned up in public, hanging in Misha's gallery for anyone to own.

"I can't do that to her," he said. "She'd hate me."

Genevieve lapsed into silence and Jared concentrated on the sheaf of wheat and the light and shadows on her arms and in her hair. She told him when she'd had enough of standing and he put his brushes in water and they both sat on the sofa to take a breather.

"How much longer do I have to pose?" she asked.

"Another hour, maybe. Do you want to see?"

"Not until it's done. Sandy said you were finished with her."

"I'm done painting her, but I'm still not satisfied with the background." He gestured to the nearly-finished painting, which was propped against the wall under the window. He wanted to fix some of the colors of the trees in the background – he wasn't sure the trunks were the right brown or that the leaves were the right pale green, or that the light was right – but the figure of Spring herself was as perfect as he could make her. He could see all the flaws now that he was finished with her, but he knew there was only so much he could tinker with the painting before he ruined it. And the last thing he wanted to do was ruin it. He'd finish it, finish *Autumn*, and then have Misha come by to look at them.

And in the meantime, he'd sent Alona the opera trainee a message asking when she could come model for him, as well as a couple of pages of sketchy ideas, and he still had to convince Danneel she wanted to be Winter.

Genevieve would help him, as would the paintings he'd already been working on. He needed her to say yes. There were no other girls he wanted to paint as badly as he wanted to paint her. There had to be a way to do it that wouldn't lead to a scandal.

"Paint her body and her hair, but give her someone else's face," Genevieve suggested, as if she could

read Jared's mind.

"What?"

"If Danneel still won't model for you. Tell her you won't paint her real face. Then no one will recognize her." She grinned, clearly pleased with herself.

"But that defeats the purpose. *Autumn* looks like you. *Spring* looks like Sandy. I got a model for *Summer*, an opera singer, and she doesn't mind that I'll be using her face. You'll help me convince her, won't you?"

"Of course I will." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You introduced us."

"Okay, break over. Back to work." He stood up and held out his hand to assist Genevieve. She laughed at his manners but accepted his hand. Once he'd adjusted her position so she and the wheat were in the exact same pose as before, he stood behind his easel again, selected a brush, dabbed it in some mustard yellow paint, and got on with his work.

He was nearly done when Danneel showed up. Genevieve didn't move a muscle but Jared could see her face brighten, and Danneel couldn't help but smile too. Jared allowed himself a mental pat on the back for his small part in facilitating their relationship. He had no idea how long it would last, but right now he didn't think that mattered.

He wondered if he and Jensen looked at each other that way, if someone else watching them could see their love on their faces. He didn't know how it couldn't be obvious.

Danneel had a net bag over one arm and was carrying several wrapped packages which she set on the sofa.

"I brought you food," she said. "And soap."

"Soap?" Jared repeated.

"I thought I'd do some laundry. Everything you own is covered in paint and charcoal."

"But I'm a painter. You don't have to wash my clothes. You'll be hauling water up and down the hallway for hours."

"If I don't, who will? I also brought a pair of scissors because you could really use a haircut."

He protested that he was an adult and could take care of himself, never mind that he hadn't particularly cared about his clothes or the rest of his appearance since Jensen had gone back to Texas. Danneel ignored him.

"I brought you something too," she said to Genevieve, smiling a little shyly. She took a small package out of her skirt pocket and handed it over.

Genevieve pulled off the paper, revealing a small cloisonné box with a yellow-orange fish on the lid. She stared at it for a minute and then laughed.

"It's a goldfish," she managed to say. She held it out towards Jared. "Look. God's telling me something." Jared took the box and Genevieve threw her arms around Danneel's neck, telling her "You have no idea," and kissing her soundly on the cheek.

"Do you want some privacy?" Jared asked, teasing. Danneel's face over Genevieve's shoulder was a mix of baffled and pleased. Genevieve giggled into her neck. "What kind of food did you bring me?"

"Bread, cheese, jam, fruit, carrots, an aubergine, a courgette, day-old brioche, cream, some eggs – I learned how to make bread pudding so I thought I'd inflict it on you. How do you feel about raisins?" She pulled away from Genevieve, who was still giggling to herself, and cast an eye on Jared's stove. He should probably be embarrassed at how dirty it was. "You don't have a good pan, do you."

"Just a teakettle. We don't really cook. Christian keeps threatening to buy us a pot so we can feed ourselves and stop making him do it, but, well." He spread his hands helplessly. He'd always had better things to do than cook. Besides, for all his complaining about Jared and Jensen's begging, Christian always fed them, because he liked feeding people.

"You don't put eggplant in bread pudding," Genevieve said.

"That's for later. Mr B's mother is coming to visit on Monday and wants to spend time with her grandchildren, so I have half of Tuesday off. I'll come back and cook for you. You too," she said to Genevieve.

"Only if you model for me," Jared said.

"Say yes," Genevieve added. "Please say yes."

"I can't," Danneel told them. "I told you, I can't risk it. I can't – it's my job, Jared. I can't jeopardize it by modeling for – for – " She gestured around the studio, at the half-finished paintings and drawings and sketches of Montmartre working girls and dancing girls and butchers with bloody aprons and people drinking in bars and rent boys and plasterers and woodworkers taking a break from beautifying Sacré-Coeur. "I'm not an artist's model and I'm not a wealthy girl who can pretend to be an artist's model. I can't."

"I won't paint you naked," he said. "You'll be fully clothed. Nothing scandalous, I promise. I won't even paint your real face. I'll make you look like someone else. No one will recognize you. I did a painting of you months ago in the Bois, pushing the baby's pram. Misha's seen it."

"That's me doing my job. It's not the same."

"Ask Mrs B," Genevieve suggested. "What if she said it was okay?"

"She won't."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Ask her anyway."

"Danneel," Jared said, "she knows you come see me on your days off. She knows we're friends. For all you know, she thinks you've modeled for me already." Danneel blanched and Jared cursed himself. That was the wrong thing to say. "Can you bring it up in casual conversation?"

"She's my employer. We don't have casual conversations."

"For me?" Genevieve asked. "Please? You're beautiful. Everyone should know that." Jared noticed that her drape was falling off her shoulder, but she made no move to adjust it. He should suggest she get dressed. He should make an excuse to leave so she could try to convince Danneel in private.

"If you really want to make bread pudding," he said to Danneel, hoping she didn't care that he was so obviously changing the subject, "you need a pan. I'll go ask the Hodges if they have one you can borrow."

He left the girls, hoping Genevieve could succeed where he couldn't, and went next door to ask the brothers if they had a pan they could spare. They did. Aldis also wanted to bend Jared's ear about photography and would Misha consider showing some photos, and if not, did Jared know of any dealers who would. He and Edwin had been to see the exhibition and were really interested in the sculptures and the Russian girl's paintings.

"How are your seasons progressing?" Aldis asked. "When are you going to paint me?"

"I can't start yours until the current series is complete. *Spring's* pretty much done except for a background thing, *Autumn* is getting there, I need to pin down a time for Summer to come model for me, and I'm still trying to convince Winter that she wants to do it." Jared jerked his thumb at the wall separating their studios. "Well, right now I think Winter's girlfriend is trying to convince her she wants to do it."

Edwin raised an eyebrow. Aldis chuckled. Jared realized what he'd said. He was pretty sure this was the first time he'd ever referred to Danneel and Genevieve as girlfriends, although he didn't think it was the first time he'd thought it. He hoped Danneel wouldn't mind. He knew Genevieve wouldn't.

All three of them were quiet, heads inclined towards Jared and Jensen's studio, listening for any signs of how convincing Genevieve might be or how stubborn Danneel might be. Jared couldn't really hear anything other than the noises the building always made – the sound of voices from the studio below them, the creak of wood floors, the squeak of a window or the slam of a door being opened or shut, the sound of carriages and carts and people out in the street below the building. He thought he could hear someone singing out in the hallway. But nothing next door.

"At least they're not fighting," Edwin finally said. "That's good, right?"

"They're not doing anything else, either," Aldis said, "unless they're really quiet." His eyebrows jumped up and down at Jared, and he went over to the wall to lift one of the blankets that Edwin had hung there. He pressed his ear to the wood, then shook his head. All quiet next door.

"I should go," Jared said. "Thanks for the pan. I'll bring you some bread pudding if it's any good." He went back to his own place, where Genevieve (now dressed in her own clothes) and Danneel were

sitting at the table, holding hands. They were talking in low voices, presumably so Jared and the Hodges couldn't hear them.

"Okay," Danneel said, when she saw him. "I'll ask Mrs B what she thinks tomorrow, and if she's okay with it, I'll model for you. You can even use my face."

"Thank you," Jared breathed.

"Thank her." She tilted her head towards Genevieve, who smiled. "You were trying to listen to us next door, weren't you."

"I borrowed a pan." He held it out.

"We didn't do anything but talk."

"I know. Weren't you going to make me a bread pudding?"

The studio was already hot but it was stiflingly so by the time the bread pudding was cooked, so they took some spoons and the pan outside to the tiny plaza, and sat on the building's front steps to eat.

On Monday night when Jared swung by the Cherokee for dinner, Christian handed him another letter from Jensen, commenting "He finally sent me a postcard." Jared opened the envelope right there but only read half the letter before he realized he'd have to finish it at home, where he could have some privacy.

He sat cross-legged on the bed and skimmed the letter until he got to the place where he'd had to stop.

It's late here in Dallas, Jensen had written, and I'm lying in my bed, my old bed, thinking of you. I'm thinking of the way your mouth tastes, the way your hands feel on me, the weight of you leaning over me, the solidity of you inside me, the heat of you when I'm inside you. I'm thinking of your long legs and your strong thighs and your clever fingers, your tongue and your throat and your shoulders and your ass. I'm thinking of your hair damp on your forehead and the back of your neck, the softness of it between my fingers as you take me in your mouth. I'm thinking of your moans and your breath and your terrible French and the way your voice sounds when you tell me you love me. I'm thinking of the couch and the bed and the floor and the wardrobe and the storage room at the Cherokee. I'm thinking of the look on your face when you come, when you watch me come.

I'm lying in my old bed in my parents' house and I'm thinking of your body and how badly I wish it were here next to mine, so that we could touch and kiss and peel each other's clothes off, and I could drape your legs over my shoulders and drive myself deep into your ass.

Jared could feel himself growing hard. He wanted to keep reading but he wasn't sure he could. He squeezed his cock with one hand and let his head fall back against the headboard.

"Ahh... Jensen," he murmured, stretching out his legs and squeezing harder. He slid down until he was lying straight out, fumbling with his pants, trying to get them open. He closed his eyes so he could at least try to imagine it was Jensen's hand shoving his pants down, reaching into his undershorts, wrapping strong fingers around his stiffening cock.

He wriggled out of his shorts as he started to stroke, letting Jensen's words burn their way into his brain and give his hand the impetus it needed. His hips pushed up into his fist and he moaned and breathed Jensen's name and he missed him, he really missed him, and then he was gasping and coming over his fingers and a vision of Jensen's face hung over him but he was still alone.

He lay there for a few minutes, catching his breath, missing his boyfriend, and then he fixed himself and sat up to finish the letter.

And I'm thinking of how you concentrate when you're working, how you look at the world, how dedicated you are to your art, how proud I am of your accomplishments. And I miss you. I miss you beyond my capacity to explain.

I do not miss Paris. I realize that now. I don't love it like you do. But I love you and I miss you and as much as I love my family, I am miserable here without you, and so I will come back gladly so I can see you and touch you and so you can touch me, and we can be together once again.

Jensen had written in his last letter "I don't think I miss Paris. I know that sounds alarming, but don't be alarmed." But it had made Jared worry anyway, and this letter – "I do not miss Paris.... I don't love it like you do" – would have made him worry as well, if that had been the only thing Jensen had said. But Jensen was thinking about him and missing him and loved him so much that he'd come back willingly to a city he didn't like, a city that hadn't given him anything near what it had given Jared.

Touch yourself and think of me, the letter continued. Stroke your cock. Imagine my voice in your ear, telling you to come for me. Know that I'm stroking myself and hearing your voice and coming for you.

And Jared did. He slept well that night, and dreamed about Jensen and Texas and getting to paint Comanche warriors and whole fields of cactus.

The next day he went out into Montmartre to draw his neighborhood. He'd completely forgotten Danneel had told him she had half of Tuesday off, and was thus surprised and confused when he came home and found her in the studio, sitting at the rickety table peeling carrots and singing to herself. He wondered who'd let her in. The light streaming in from the open windows lit her hair like polished mahogany. She'd make a beautiful Winter. He was so grateful to Genevieve for convincing her to do it.

"Jared!" she cried, when she saw him. "Your door was unlocked! You should really lock it – you don't know who could just waltz in and make themselves at home." She grinned and gestured to *Spring*, which was leaning against the wall, and then *Autumn*, which was still on the easel because Jared had to finish the background. "They look good."

"Do you have time to model for me today?"

"Maybe." She smiled to herself and turned back to her carrots. "I said I'd cook for you, didn't I? I thought I'd make a kind of modified ratatouille. Are Genevieve and Sandy coming?"

"I thought Genevieve said she would."

"Good. She's – I like her."

"I know." Jared sat across the table from her, watching her peel carrots and cut them into orange coins,

and then move on to the eggplant, slicing it into thin disks and arranging them on a plate. He watched her sprinkle salt on the eggplant slices and absently eat a couple of pieces of carrot before moving on to the zucchini she'd brought earlier.

"Do you want some help?" he asked. He itched to open his sketchbook and draw her at work. He wanted to capture her look of concentration, the sunlight on her hair, the way she licked salt off her fingertips.

"No, I'm good."

"Do you mind if I draw you?"

"No." She smiled at the zucchini, and he fetched his sketchbook and a pencil so he could at least try to capture her expression and her kindness and her fingers around the handle of the knife.

The ratatouille was nearly finished when Sandy and Genevieve showed up, the two of them considerably bringing a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine. Jared didn't have enough chairs so he dragged the table over to the couch, and the four of them arranged themselves and dug in.

"You can come cook for us any time," Sandy said, her mouth full. She dabbed at her lips with the edge of her sleeve. "This is so good."

"Our landlady is a terrible cook," Genevieve explained. "We get a hot meal a day with our room, but it's not that great. There's usually enough of it, at least."

"Today is kind of a fluke," Danneel said. "I just happen to have the afternoon off."

"How much of the afternoon? Can you come to the Green Door tonight?"

"I don't think so. I'm expected back at least for coffee and dessert after dinner."

Genevieve's face fell. Jared surreptitiously nudged her foot under the table.

"I have Saturday night off, though," Danneel went on. "If I can get back to the house by midnight I can see you."

"We'll get you home," Sandy said. "Don't worry about it."

She turned out to have Saturday afternoon as well, which meant Jared could get a head start on painting her. She was a good model, especially once she realized she was not only going to be fully dressed but wearing a cloak with a hood, and she stood where Jared put her while he made a sketch on his canvas and then started to paint.

He danced with her at the Green Door that night, and she told him he was a good friend and a genius painter, and for some reason her words made him think of Jensen and he was surprised to discover that it made him smile, rather than making him ache.

But later, lying in bed drunk and alone, he stroked himself and murmured Jensen's name and hated that they were apart, that there was an ocean between them, that he had weeks yet until Jensen came back.

But what could he do but suffer the days until Jensen returned? At least he had his work to keep him busy, and his friends to keep him company, and he was selling paintings and making money. He just wished Jensen was around to enjoy it too.

He'd finally set a time for Alona, the aspiring opera singer, to come model for *Summer*, and the day of her first session she showed up on time and with a friend, a boy only a little taller than she was and with a profusion of dark curly hair. He had an easy smile and introduced himself as Darren, future opera star, musician, actor, all-around artistic genius. But he grinned as he said it, and he didn't strike Jared as particularly arrogant about his talents.

"He wanted to see Montmartre," Alona explained, "and I think he was worried for my safety." She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling as she did so. Darren looked unrepentant.

"Do you need a male model?" he asked Jared, but before Jared could answer, Darren was off to look at the paintings around the studio.

"He can't sit still," Alona said. She shrugged off her shawl. "Where do you want me? How do you want me? I liked your suggestions, but I don't have a preference."

"How much time do you have?" Jared asked.

"A few hours. I have to be somewhere at eight, so I should be home by seven so I have time to change."

"I hear music," Darren said suddenly from across the studio. He cocked his head at the wall. "Are your neighbors musicians?"

"Edwin's a composer," Jared told him.

"What has he written? Would I know his work? Would he mind if I introduced myself?"

"He might be busy."

Darren knocked on the wall and called "Hello? Mr Composer? Are you busy?" through it. Alona laughed. "Can you hear me? Would you mind if I came over?"

"Go say hi," Alona said, and Darren bounded out of the studio. Alona and Jared were quiet, listening for him to introduce himself to Edwin and for Edwin to either let him stay or tell him to go. After a few minutes they could hear the piano and a voice singing.

"I guess he's not busy," Jared said. He gestured to Alona to come closer. "Can you pull your sleeves off your shoulders? And take your hair down." She fiddled with the pins until her blonde hair fell long and wavy down her shoulders. She fluffed it out, then stood still while Jared tried to arrange it around her face. "Good, good. I was thinking maybe having you with your feet in a river, so if you could sit..." He looked around the studio, trying to find something high enough to simulate the bank of a river. He shoved everything off the table. "Here. Sit on the table and pretend you're dipping your feet in the water."

Half an hour later he hated the idea – all his other seasons would be standing – and made her get off the table and take off her dress so he could drape her in a sheet to approximate the half-dressed summer

maiden he'd started to envision. She giggled as he arranged the sheet in a modified toga.

"Is this a problem?" he asked, suddenly worried about her future opera modesty. "Painting you half-naked?"

"Not at all." She pulled the sheet out of his hands and tied it more securely over her shoulder. She climbed on the table again. "Your first idea was a good one." She flipped the sheet around to expose her legs, pointed her toes, and leaned back in a pose that made Jared think of girls out on a picnic, stripping down to their chemises and pulling up their skirts to feel the sun on their shoulders and dangle their legs in a summer pond.

He glanced at *Spring*, at Sandy in pale green holding a fluffed-up robin in both hands, Texas bluebonnets around her feet, and at *Autumn*, at Genevieve in russet holding a sheaf of wheat with grapes in her hair. The half-finished *Winter* depicted Danneel in a dark blue cape with a hood, and he'd thought to paint Alona in golden yellow. Of all of them, she looked the most like she was about to step out of her clothes and stand naked in front of the viewer.

By six, Jared had a good sketch of her sitting on the edge of the table, bare legs kicking at the imaginary water, face turned up to the imaginary summer sun, hair blowing around her face. She looked young and carefree. Her painting would be beautiful. He was so pleased she'd agreed to model for him, that night he met her at the exhibition.



The Bed

Jared was tired of standing in his studio painting seasons, so he went out to refresh his brain with some work in the Bois de Boulogne, like old times. He even saw the woman with the ocelot – the Queen of Sheba, Madame Fishburne. He hadn't forgotten that Mrs B had wanted her to commission a portrait, but he hadn't heard any more about it. It felt like years had passed since he'd seen Danneel here and she'd told him she knew a dealer who might be interested in selling his work. So much had happened, and so much of it was good. It was a pleasant, relaxing day – if hot – and he came home to find a note on the table, written on good-quality notepaper and considerably propped up against an empty wine bottle:

Jared.

A lovely girl named Marion let me in. She would like her rent.

Shit, Jared thought. Was it the first of the month already? Time flew when you weren't paying attention and you didn't have a practical boyfriend around to keep track of the calendar. Jared was counting the days until Jensen returned, but he'd never bothered to assign actual dates to those days.

Your paintings are selling and interest in your work is good. I have money for you. I like what you have been doing here. I will take your Four Seasons when you have finished the winter painting, and I

will find a good buyer for them.

Come to the gallery tomorrow around three. We will have tea and biscuits and talk about work and art.

Misha.

Under that was a scribble that Jared assumed was Misha's Russian signature, and at the very bottom of the page was printed "Galerie Collins" and the address in an interesting, slightly off-kilter typeface.

Misha's gallery was near Galerie Sheppard, where the Salon of Nine was still up. Jared should drop by and see what had sold, of his and everyone else's work. He was sure collectors had bought up all the Russian painter's work, because it was interesting and pretty and people were willing to display pictures of naked women in their houses if they could call it art.

He'd been thinking about his idea to do male versions of his *Four Seasons*, now that his female *Winter* was nearly finished. He'd had to take a break from it to wait for Danneel to be able to come back for a second session. *Summer* had been much easier. Alona had been able to fit him into her schedule without any trouble. He'd ask Misha if male seasons sounded like a good plan.

Misha thought it might work, although there wasn't the same market for men that there was for women.

"You should do it anyway," he continued, stirring jam into his tea. It was strawberry today, as it had been the first time Jared went to Misha's house to sign a contract so Misha could show his work. The jam made Jared think of the strawberry pots in Mrs B's garden. Misha had hung her portrait in his gallery and had even gotten some interest from people who wanted to buy it. "It will be interesting, and that is always good. Sometimes we must shake current fashion out of its complacency and show it something new."

"I haven't been able to ask Summer if he'd model for me, but he's coming back to Paris in nine days and I'll ask him then."

Misha nodded in understanding.

"I've been working on some things besides the seasons," Jared said. "I guess you saw them when you came over."

"Yes. Your work continues to be good. Your technique is improving and your subjects are still quite interesting. I notice you have not made any new watercolors." He grinned.

"You said I wasn't that good." It had been months since Misha had come to the studio to evaluate Jared's work, but Jared hadn't forgotten the dismissal of his watercolors. But he also hadn't spent much time trying to improve them, not when he could jump right into oil and charcoal where he actually had some skill.

"I did, yes." Misha sipped his tea. "But your oils are lovely. I see Mucha's influence, but your style is clearly your own. Biscuit?" He held out the plate and Jared took a couple of cookies. *Pryaniki* again, the Russian tea cookies. He bit into one, noting that it tasted more gingery and less sweet than the last time he'd had them. "Jennifer was pleased with your portrait. She would not have let me hang it in my gallery if she weren't."

"I really liked painting her. She was a great model. And it was nice to get out of my world and into someone else's. I don't think I shook up the current fashion, but I liked it a lot." He'd also liked the money it had brought him, which had allowed him to give Marion two months of back rent. It wasn't much but at least it was a start.

"How did you like working on commission? She may give your name out to her friends, and you may find more work that way."

"It's the first time I ever painted something specific for someone." Which wasn't entirely true, because in a sense Jensen had commissioned the painting for Mackenzie's wedding, although he hadn't actually paid for it. "I could do it again, sure. The money's nice."

"Which reminds me." Misha stood, rummaged in his jacket pockets, and came up with an envelope which he handed to Jared. Jared pulled out a wad of bills, counted them, counted them again, and tried to calculate how many months of back rent it would cover. More than Mrs B's portrait, that was for sure. He could start paying Christian back. "I have an invoice as well," Misha went on, now rummaging in another pocket and pulling out a folded sheet of paper, which turned out to be a list of the paintings Jared had sold, what Misha had sold them for, how much Jared had earned from each sale, and what Misha's commission had been.

"Holy shit," Jared breathed.

"You have only one work left to sell, but I do not expect that will take long. I have been thinking of mounting a solo exhibition for you, or perhaps a dual show with Monsieur Evans." It took Jared a minute to connect the name to one of the other painters who had also shown their work at the Salon of Nine. "His style is different, but you complement one another. And you are both Americans, which I admit is a gimmick but there is a nice symmetry in being able to find a commonality between artists. In any case, there was work in your studio that I would like to buy for my gallery. As I am not taking it for a particular exhibition, I will pay you outright for it. Your *Four Seasons*, for example, and there was a painting of what I assume is the dressing room of your cabaret, and one of the Bois, and a pencil drawing of a man sitting on a bed rolling a cigarette. That may be too intimate to show the general public – "

Oh. Shit. That was a drawing of Jensen that Jared had done not long after he'd gone home, a kind of memory drawing of the morning after Jared had gotten his invitation to the Salon, when he'd woken up to Jensen singing to himself as he rolled his morning cigarette. Jared had tacked it to the wall by the bed, and it hadn't even occurred to him that Misha might look at it as something he could sell.

"If you made a painting of that one – "

"I can't," Jared interrupted. Misha raised an eyebrow at him. "I mean. I can't. It's my boyfriend. He's not even in Paris. He went home for his sister's wedding. He doesn't know I drew him like that. He'd never let me sell it." If Jensen wouldn't let Jared sell *The Bed*, he'd never let him even show this one. It was too intimate, too private. Jensen was just wearing his undershorts. He had bedhead. He had clearly just woken up. There was no one else in the picture, but Jared knew, because he remembered the morning, that there was someone just out of frame, someone who loved Jensen very much, who thought he was the most beautiful man who ever lived, and who couldn't wait to put eager hands and mouth all over him. "It's, it's our life. It's private. I drew that for myself, to remember him while he's

in Texas."

"Would you consider keeping the pose, but making him a girl? In her shift, sitting on her bed, rolling a cigarette. A bit scandalous, perhaps, to show a pretty girl the morning after, with a cigarette, but I could put it in my gallery. And your boyfriend will not kill you."

Sandy would model for it, or Genevieve. Or he could use another dancer. Maybe Emmanuelle, who had loaned him the cloak he'd put on Danneel in *Winter*. He could even pay her now.

"I could do that," Jared said.

"Good." Misha finished his tea. "You may wish to put your money in your pocket so that you do not lose it." He gestured with his cup to the bills fanned out on the table and winked at Jared. "Your landlady will appreciate it."

"She's the landlady's grand-niece." Jared stuffed the money and the invoice into separate pockets. Carrying that many bills at one time made him nervous. He'd go straight back to the studio, empty his pockets, set aside a couple months' worth for Marion, and take Christian a nice stack. He could buy champagne for the girls at the Green Door. He could take Jensen out for a really good dinner when Jensen came back. He could buy more paint, some canvases, new feather pillows. He could buy a pan and learn to cook for himself.

"Do not spend it all in one place," Misha said, chuckling. "I will come by in two weeks to see your *Four Seasons* – the series should be ready by then – and to buy more work. That will give you time to make a painting of that drawing that you will not sell, and perhaps you will have even started painting your male seasons. I would like to see that series."

"It will be fun. And different." Jared stood, Misha stood, and they shook hands. At the door, Jared was surprised by Misha kissing him on both cheeks before letting him go.

Jared practically ran back to Montmartre and his studio, where he threw his painting money all over the bed and jumped on it. There weren't quite enough bills for the effect he wanted, but still, it was a nice feeling. He counted out three months for Marion and put them back in the envelope, then counted out some more for Christian, then stuffed a couple into his billfold for tonight, and then went next door to invite Aldis and Edwin out for dinner, drinks, and dancing. They went to the Cherokee first, where Christian feigned shock that Jared was actually paying him back, and Steve, to Jared's great surprise, admitted that he knew Jared would.

"You said something encouraging," Jared said, amazed. Steve shrugged.

"Jensen must have rubbed off on me," he said. Christian and Aldis both snickered. Jared suddenly got the double entendre, and laughed.

He bought everyone in the café a drink. He chatted with Christian and Steve and the brothers and the nameless poet, ate dinner, finally went off to the Green Door. It was early enough that he could sneak into the dressing room while Aldis and Edwin settled at a table. He told Sandy and Genevieve and the rest of the dancing girls he'd finally collected some actual money for his work. Some of the girls made what he guessed were fairly obscene suggestions as to what he could do with his windfall, and since Jensen wasn't around to translate, Sandy had to. She just told him that he wouldn't be interested in their

offers and left it at that.

He bought champagne, drank with Aldis and Edwin, even danced with Aldis once and Sandy twice, and finally reeled home way too late, full of success and champagne and love for Paris and everyone in it.

Nine days later Jensen came back.

Jared was about to leave for the train station to meet him when the studio door opened unexpectedly and Jensen walked in.

"I caught an earlier train," he explained, dropping his bag as Jared gaped at him. "I didn't even stop at the Cherokee. I came straight back."

"You didn't go say hi to Christian? Every time he had a letter for me, he complained that you weren't writing to him."

"I wrote him and Steve." Jensen rolled his eyes. "I even brought them presents. I'll go tomorrow. I wanted to see you first."

And then Jared was across the studio and throwing his arms around Jensen and kissing him as if he needed Jensen's lips on his in order to survive.

Jensen's return kiss was hard, almost bruising, his hands on Jared's arms, shoulders, face, fingers tangling in his hair as it went on and on, for so long that Jared thought he might suffocate. Jensen pushed his tongue down Jared's throat, squeezed his ass, ground against him, and when they finally came up for air, his "I've been thinking about fucking you for weeks" was hoarse and breathless. Jared was almost instantly hard.

They managed to get their clothes off and head for the bed without tripping over anything or each other, and without pulling away from each other or stopping their roaming hands or hungry mouths. Jensen pushed Jared down on the mattress, fell on top of him, and rubbed hard against him while he bit at Jared's lips and tried to devour his mouth. Jared wrapped his legs around Jensen's waist and pushed up against him, reaching for his ass, but Jensen grabbed his wrists, pulled them up and back, and wrapped one of Jared's hands around the side of the headboard.

"What are you – " Jared started to ask, but Jensen was sucking on his finger and shifting position just enough to push that finger into Jared's ass, and the rest of the question was lost in an anticipatory moan.

Not a minute later Jensen shifted again, this time so he could pump his cock twice and then guide it into Jared's body. He leaned over Jared, stretching, grabbing at the headboard himself and using it as leverage to fuck Jared hard enough to make the bed knock against the wall. He slammed into him, grunting with effort and pleasure, and Jared let go of the headboard to squeeze Jensen's ass with both hands to encourage him to thrust deeper, faster.

The bedframe banged into the wall – and Jared really, really hoped the Hodges were both out – and then Jensen was shuddering and groaning and gasping for breath as he came.

But he kept moving, fucking Jared through his own climax, letting go of the headboard to reach between them to take Jared's swollen cock in his hand and stroke until Jared came as well.

When it was over Jensen collapsed on Jared's chest, his face pressed into Jared's shoulder, breathing heavily, exhausted and spent.

"Holy fuck," Jared panted. He brushed his hand over Jensen's hair.

"That's six weeks of not being able to touch you," Jensen said.

"I. Wow." He pushed Jensen's face up so they could see each other, stroked his bottom lip with a still-trembling thumb, and smiled. "I hope we didn't disturb Edwin."

"I don't think he's home."

"I hope not." Jared cupped Jensen's cheek with one hand. "You're so fucking beautiful. And I'd think that even if you hadn't just made me come like a screaming train."

"You can do the same to me later." Jensen dropped a kiss on Jared's lips, pulled out, and flopped over onto his side on the bed. He reached across Jared's chest, took his hand, and laced their fingers together. "I've been thinking," he said quietly.

"I hope you didn't hurt yourself." Jared grinned. Jensen let go of his hand and swatted him on the head.

"I'm serious. I told you I didn't miss Paris. I can't write here any more. I can't get anything done. This city is good to you, but it's so hard for me. But I made a lot of notes when I was home. I wrote a lot, more than you'd think I could, considering my sister got married and I had so many friends and relatives to see. I even ran into Joanna, my last day there. She's married now. She looked happy."

There was a time, Jared knew, when Joanna thought she and Jensen would get married. That was before he met Jared, but he already knew that he didn't want to be with a woman. Jared had never met her, obviously, but he was still glad that she was happy now. He knew losing Jensen had been hard for her.

Well, of course it was. She was in love with him. She thought she'd get to be with him forever. If the same thing had happened to Jared, he'd be heartbroken too.

"What were you thinking?" he prompted Jensen now.

"There was a day, just one day, when I thought I'd stay in Dallas and not come back here."

Jared's heart skipped. He sat up and stared at Jensen's calm, slightly flushed face.

"I changed my mind," Jensen said. "Clearly." He pushed on Jared's shoulder to get him to lie down again. "But you're here. So I came back for you. I like Paris now that I'm back, but maybe Paris doesn't like me. But Paris loves you." And here he propped himself up on an elbow, brushed Jared's hair back, and gently stroked his face. "Of course Paris loves you. Everywhere loves you. You're making a success of yourself. I always knew you would." He leaned down and brushed his lips across Jared's mouth. "What I was thinking is that I love you, and right now I'm happy to go where you go, because you're there. But I want to go back to the States eventually. There's no one to buy my work here. I can't mount a play or sell a story. My French is good enough but I want to write in English, and

I couldn't even do that. I was a little jealous of your success, because you *have* success."

"Jensen – "

"Just listen. I gave this a lot of thought. You're making money, selling paintings, but I knew you would be. I know you'll sell all the work that you showed at the exhibition. But you can't support both of us, and I can't be your kept man. Sandy wrote me begging me to come back sooner – the pianist at the Green Door is having some kind of breakdown and I'm much more reliable than he is. In a day or two I'll go talk to them about maybe getting a permanent gig there. I can play the piano and you'll paint, and then we'll both be making money."

"It's not what you want to do, though."

"No, but it might help me anyway. Maybe I just need to do something different with myself to get the writing part of my brain to work again. Did you ever meet Christian's friend David? I saw him too – he was in Dallas the same time I was, just by coincidence – he's working for a magazine in Philadelphia and told me to send him some of my Paris vignettes. He might know someone who would be interested in them. I don't expect much, but it's some kind of progress. And it's a goal to aim for. A deadline. I think I need something to force me to write."

"I didn't realize you were so unhappy," Jared said softly. He felt terrible, like he'd been ignoring Jensen in favor of his career. His boyfriend had been blocked and miserable and unsuccessful and unfulfilled, and Jared hadn't even seen it. "I'm sorry. If you'd told me – "

"What would you have done? I didn't want you to give up your career, now that it looks like you might actually have one. It's not your fault I was so tight-lipped. I thought about that too, what I could've done to change things, and if it would matter at all if I actually talked to you about it."

"I just thought about my art," Jared admitted. "And how much I missed you."

"And I thought about *my* art, and how I could rearrange my life here so I could be happy and creative and productive."

"So what do we do now?"

"Right now?" Jensen's grin was wicked. He trailed his hand down Jared's side to his hip. "Right now I think you should kiss me, and you should keep kissing me until you're ready to fuck me. And then we should mess up the bed some more." His fingers stroked Jared's skin. Jared made a soft, involuntary noise of pleasure. "Or we could move to the couch, in case Aldis and Edwin come back." He leaned down and licked at Jared's lips. "Let's do that. Maybe I'll suck you until you're hard, and then ride you."

Jared moaned. He couldn't believe he'd survived six weeks without this man.

"After that we should probably have something to eat and drink," Jensen continued conversationally, "and then you can tell me what you want to do to me, or what I should do to you, and we'll do that. We don't have to leave the studio until tomorrow night, and then only to go to the Cherokee to deliver Christian and Steve's presents, and say hello. We should also probably go to the Green Door to see the girls. I brought them little things too."

Jared's tongue snaked out to push past Jensen's lips, and they kissed lazily for a while.

"You can even paint me, if you want," Jensen murmured.

"What?" Jared pushed Jensen's face away from him in surprise.

"I said you can paint me." Jensen grinned almost shyly. "I thought about that too. I'll model for you. Maybe not naked, but... you can paint me and sell it."

"You'll be a really hot Summer."

"What do you mean? That sounds like an obvious pun."

"I didn't get a chance to tell you – I'm going to do a series of the four seasons with male models. Everyone does female seasons. I did female seasons. But I could paint male seasons too. Misha thinks he might even be able to sell them. Anton gave me the idea, actually, so I told him I'd use him for *Spring*. Aldis is going to be Winter, and Steve convinced Christian to be Autumn. And you'd be Summer." He could feel himself beaming, just brimming over with plans and prospects and the chance to get Jensen as the most perfect model that ever was.

"But not naked," Jensen said.

"Half-naked, maybe. Not totally. No one will ever see you completely naked except for me."

"Good." Jensen kissed him lightly. "As long as you don't sell *The Bed*."

"Never. That's yours."

Jared didn't mention the drawing of Jensen in his undershorts rolling a cigarette, which Misha had wanted him to paint so it could be sold. Either Jensen would see the drawing pinned to the wall or he wouldn't, and if he brought it up he'd only hear the truth – that Jared had drawn it while Jensen was in Texas to remember him, and that it was his, and it was only going to leave the studio when they moved out.

They went back to kissing and never actually made it to the sofa. Jensen slid down the bed to take Jared in his mouth, sucking and licking and teasing as promised until Jared was hard and ready, and then straddling him and taking his time. Jared rested his hands on Jensen's hips and watched his face as he rose and fell, watched his cock bounce with his movements, and thought again how lucky he was, how amazing his boyfriend was, how perfect his life was.

Afterwards, Jensen unpacked his things while Jared went to fill the washbasin at the sink down the hall – they were both sticky and sweaty and he at least wanted to sponge off – and they ate what little was in the studio, as well as the cheese and paté and apples that Jensen had bought in the train station at Le Havre. They caught each other up on the things that had happened that they hadn't written about. Jared showed off the work he'd done the past six weeks, the pieces he'd started and finished and even the paintings he'd given up on – he'd made some preliminary sketches to turn the drawing of Jensen on the bed into a painting of a girl the morning after, as Misha had suggested - and Jensen talked about the plays he wanted to write and the ideas he'd had, and he let Jared read some of his notes and the stories

he'd started writing on the ship back.

Except for a quick run to get bread and cheese and wine, they didn't leave the studio until the next afternoon, when they finally got dressed and went to the Cherokee so Jensen could deliver his gifts and Christian and Steve could welcome him back to Paris. From there they went to the Green Door, so Sandy and Genevieve could do the same, and Jared promised himself to send Danneel a note telling her Jensen was back, in case she was free on Saturday and wanted to come see him.

The boys exhausted each other again that night after they got home, as Jared imagined they'd do every night until the novelty of being in the same place again wore off. Jensen fell asleep first, his arm flung across Jared's chest, and Jared lay on the crumpled sheets in the humid dark and wished for a cooling breeze and listened to Jensen breathing, listened to the night sounds of Paris outside their windows – people out late calling to each other, the rattle of a horse and cart, the chirp of crickets – listened to the creaking and settling of the old factory and the noises of the people who lived and worked and slept in it, and he thought.

He was going to be a better boyfriend – more attentive, more observant. Jensen had been supporting him since before they even set out for Paris, and now it was Jared's turn. If Paris could give him Misha and the Salon of Nine and his commission for Mrs B, it could give Jensen the same. He'd find his writing again, and Jared would continue to paint, and they'd finally have some money, and they'd be happy.

His life was good. He wanted Jensen's life to be good too. He knew it could only get better – after all, they were young and in love and in Paris together, and they were both going to do great things. He couldn't wait.

We ate well and cheaply and drank well and cheaply and slept well and warm together and loved each other.
--EH

