

THE  
PORTRAIT  
OF  
ELOISE  
LECLAIR

*a novel*

ERIK RICHTER



*The Portrait of Eloise Leclair* is a work of fiction inspired by true events, where fictional characters interact with historical figures. While certain aspects of the story draw from real events and people, all incidents and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and should not be interpreted as factual. Minor adjustments to the timing, locations, and details of historical figures or events have been made to serve the narrative, as outlined in the Author's Note at the end of the book. Beyond these creative liberties, any similarities to actual persons, living or deceased, events, or locales are purely coincidental.

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Published in the United States of America by Cakebar Publishing

The cataloguing-in-publication data is on file with the Library of Congress

ISBN 979-8-218-08668-8

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Inspired by true events

# Prologue

The knocking grew louder. What began as a firm rap on the door quickly escalated into steady, angry pounds. Inside the dim apartment, a man frantically rifled through his study drawers, hands shaking as he shuffled through papers and trinkets. He wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for, but surely would be if he found it. Time was running out, but years of careful preparation gave him a small sense of security.

*Could I have been more careful?* he wondered.

There wasn't much in the office, just a few drawers and a desk. The closet was already empty except for a rolled-up carpet and a few bundled stacks of "Le Monde" newspapers that no longer served their original purpose. He rarely worked in here anymore and, aside from the occasional visit to open the window, had little reason to enter. Thankfully, the walls couldn't speak.

Satisfied that everything appeared in order, he made his way to the bedroom, limping on a leg that never quite healed right. Outside, the pounding grew more urgent, as if the door might give way under the force.

*"Une seconde!"* he shouted. All his neighbors would've heard the commotion, yet none would dare investigate its source. *The door will hold*, he told himself, trying to summon confidence. Though a darker voice inside him whispered back, *I hope it will hold*.

He fumbled through the top drawer of his dresser, ignoring the few hundred francs tucked inside. *A good decoy*, he thought. After all he had been through, losing this would be the least of his concerns. Maybe it would even spare him further distress. His gaze briefly fell on the Bible next to his bed—another misdirect, hopefully to steer suspicion elsewhere.

As he hobbled back through the narrow hallway toward the main door, his mind churned with dread. Had he delayed too long? *Would they be forgiving to a man who struggled to move quickly on a broken leg? ...probably not.*

Reaching for the door, he opened it fully, knowing that if he opened it just a crack, they would simply kick it in and knock him over.

*“Oui? Comment je peux vous aider?”* How may I help you?” he asked. But despite the veneer of curiosity, he knew exactly why they were here. This is the moment he had been expecting. It was the reason his life had changed so much in the last few years. It was the reason for the cast on his leg. It was the reason he was in the flat alone. And now it was the reason three men in dark uniforms were standing in his doorway, each staring at him with a cold and predatory fierceness. Despite his fear, the man tried to appear casual.

“Sorry I couldn’t get to the door quicker,” he said, glancing down at his leg. “My leg is... well, it’s in rough shape.”

They didn’t care.

“Monsieur Bourget?” the first man said. It was more of a statement than a question.

*“Oui?”* he replied, barely finishing before the officer thrust a piece of paper in his face.

“By authority of The Führer, we are hereby ordered to seize any and all illegal items you have in your home.”

His family name was still most definitely on their list. Though the bulk of their wealth had largely dissipated, at one point, they had a collection of Renaissance, Baroque, and Impressionist paintings. The Nazis had long been “confiscating” such treasures under the guise of seizing “illegal contraband.” But those paintings were gone now.

“I’ve already submitted the declaration. I have nothing illegal,” the man said, trying to explain. But his words were meaningless. He knew they would be, but he played along anyway, pretending that trust still held value. The soldiers weren’t here to believe him—they were here to intimidate, to take. The lead officer pushed him aside, allowing the other two to step past, their boots heavy against the wooden floor as they began their search.

“If you have any contraband in here, we will find it,” the officer said flatly. “And then you will be arrested.”

The man didn’t respond, standing silently as the soldiers moved through his apartment. He knew how this would go. They would rummage through every drawer, overturn every piece of furniture, and if they found nothing, they would try again. There was no point in resisting. As far as he knew, they would find nothing here.

He had moved into this space a few years ago, after everything had happened, and lived a purposefully meager life. Money and valuables were no longer of any interest to him. While he had them, it was nice. But he soon realized there are some things money cannot buy, and with that realization came a true distrust in its false sense of security.

The soldiers split up, two heading for the bedroom and study, while the third stayed back, keeping a close watch on him. From where the man stood, he could hear drawers crashing and papers rustling in each room. It pained him to think about what he would find when he went back in there... *If I ever go back in there*, he thought.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours. When the two soldiers finally returned to the main room, their expressions were dark with frustration. They were accustomed to finding what they sought, to wielding the power such discoveries afforded them. But this time, they had almost nothing. The man's eyes caught the edge of the francs from his study, now visible in one soldier's side pocket. *I'm glad they found "something"* Yet as their search of the living room continued to yield nothing, their irritation only grew.

"Where are these?" the first officer barked, firmly thrusting a list at the man.

"I told you," he said simply. "I don't have those paintings anymore."

And he didn't. It was true none of his family's paintings on the list were inside his flat, or at their ancestral estate just outside of Paris that the Nazis had looted many times since the occupation started. What little he had now was of no interest to them—old photographs, letters, fragments of a life that held value only to him. Most of these things could not have a price put on them. Most of them would be worthless to the men searching his home.

Most of them.

He had no items they *declared* contraband in his possession. He had no secrets to hide—except one. And with all that was going on, he knew this secret was one he needed to protect. It wasn't contraband, not officially, but he knew that if the Nazis found it, they would seize it without hesitation. But no matter how much money he had or needed, he would never give it up. It was worth more to him than its value, which was extremely high.

And it was here, right now, in the room with all of them, hidden in a place they would never think to look. As the soldiers finished their search,

frustrated to not find anything that met their expectations, they departed, leaving the apartment in shambles.

But the man remained, standing in the center of the wreckage, his heart pounding as a small, fierce triumph warmed his chest. Once he was certain they were gone, he let out a knowing chuckle, his gaze drifting to a small object tucked in the corner of the room. They had come, searched, and left, never realizing how close they had been to uncovering what was just within their reach.

# Chapter 1

## *Paris, Modern Day*

The old oak door off Rue du Bac arduously opened under its own weight to the brisk autumn breeze of an early Paris October. Splintered on every edge and weathered to a point where its original color could only be imagined, the door had seen centuries of use and, deceptively, looked like it could fall apart with an ambitious close. In truth, it was verifiably solid and would most likely withstand centuries more of repeated use.

Pivoting on a trio of equally aged black iron hinges, the door effortlessly collided with an unequal match in a tiny bell suspended above by a steel coil, producing a quick succession of three diminished rings. The delicate chimes blended harmoniously with soft strains of classical music playing in the distance, echoing through a winding maze of walls and filling the back room of the space with an enchanting symphony of old meeting new.

In this dimly lit, climate-controlled room, Amelia Beckett immersed herself in a world of colors, textures, and time-worn canvases. With a magnifying visor perched on her forehead and fine brushes in hand, her auburn hair was pulled back into a loose bun, revealing the faint splatter of paint on her cheek—a remnant of the day's work.

Her blue eyes, deep and expressive, squinted as they adjusted to focus on the minuscule details of the painting before her. The canvas depicted a Parisian streetscape, its vibrant hues dulled by age. Time had taken its toll on the artwork, with tiny cracks forming a spiderweb of patterns across the surface.

The room smelled of linseed oil, old paper, and a myriad of chemicals—each with a specific purpose in the restoration process. Complementing the soft background melody, the rhythmic hum of specialized equipment monitoring the room's temperature and humidity added to its



tranquil ambiance, creating a soothing backdrop for Amelia's focused work.

Her fingers danced deftly over the canvas. Her touch was gentle yet firm—a dance between reverence for the original artist and the desire to restore the painting to its former glory. Every stroke, every blend, was a testament to her years of training and innate talent.

Her surrounding workspace showed creative organization. Neatly lined up jars of pigments, solvents, and varnishes contrasted the reference books and color charts which lay scattered across her desk. Beside her, on an easel, was a black-and-white photograph of the painting taken decades ago, a point of reference to guide her restoration.

Even in such intense concentration, there was a grace to Amelia—a passion evident in the curve of her lips as they pursed in thought, or the gentle furrowing of her brow. For those who saw her in this element, it was clear: she was not just restoring a painting; she was breathing life back into history.

A soft “*Bonjour?*” resonated behind the chime of the bell, its delicate tone weaving through the harmonious blend of music and the rhythmic cadence of brushstrokes. This subtle intrusion gently coaxed Amelia away from the cocoon of concentration that surrounded her in her canvas-filled sanctuary. She let out a soft, contemplative sigh and set down her brush, its bristles still glistening with a rich blend of ochre and sienna.

With careful, reverent movements, she removed her magnifying visor and placed it beside the painting. Rising gracefully from her stool, she paused, letting the momentary light-headedness pass, then smoothed her apron, adorned with vibrant flecks—each a testament to her journey through art's vast tapestry.

Navigating the maze of her studio, Amelia emerged into the front room where the afternoon sun of Paris cast a welcoming glow. The transition was palpable: from the dense, aroma-filled air of her working space to the brighter, fresher atmosphere of the front room. Here, the walls were a gallery of her craft, displaying an array of framed artworks—some bearing the final touches of completion, others still hinting at their stories, awaiting her restorative touch.

There, standing in the doorway with the poise of a figure stepped out from a classic French novel, was Madame Geneviève Laurent. Over the years, Geneviève, a woman whose age contradicted her graceful bearing, had become a regular. Her eyes, sharp and discerning, had witnessed

decades of Parisian evolution, yet they always held an appreciation for the arts. Her perfectly coiffed silver hair shimmered under the afternoon sun, and her blend of classic elegance and modern attire spoke of her impeccable taste.

“Madame Laurent!” Amelia greeted, her voice a blend of professional warmth and genuine fondness. “It’s always a pleasure to see you.”

Geneviève’s lips curved into a smile, one that had graced countless social gatherings and hinted at stories she had yet to tell. “Amelia, my dear, I do hope I’m not interrupting. But I simply couldn’t wait to show you my latest find!”

“Not at all!” Amelia said warmly, gesturing her inside and guiding her toward the small consultation area.

As Geneviève walked, she filled the room with the fragrance of her perfume—a hint of lavender and something unmistakably vintage. It was the scent of old Paris, of stories nestled in the corners of small shops and the pathways of the covered markets in the Third. In her hands she carried a large package, wrapped with the care and anticipation of someone presenting a treasure.

She placed the brown-paper-wrapped package gently on the table, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I found something special this time, something I think you’ll appreciate!”

As Geneviève slowly unwrapped the object, a beautifully ornate frame appeared—its once attractive gold leaf, now faded and chipped, showed many dignified scars of time. However, the frame’s intricate craftsmanship stood out undiminished, a testament to whatever skilled hands had created it centuries ago. A faded painting, nestled within the frame, revealed details lost to time, but still showed a charm that spoke of a long-forgotten era.

Amelia’s eyes lit up with recognition and admiration as she leaned closer, her gaze shifting between the frame and the ghostly image it held. “This is beautiful, Geneviève! Late Baroque, isn’t it?” she said softly, her voice mixed with professional appraisal and genuine awe.

Geneviève watched Amelia’s admiration with a growing smile. “Exactly!” she responded, her excitement matching Amelia’s recognition of the frame’s era. “I thought you would appreciate it. It’s not every day that one stumbles upon something with such history and... elegance.”

Like the misshapen pearl it was named for—*barroco* in Portuguese—Baroque art refused to play by the rules. It burst into 17th-century Eu-

rope with a rebellious spirit, thumbing its nose at ordinary beauty. Unlike the balanced and harmonious designs typically found in Renaissance art, Baroque embraced the grand and dramatic—its complex style mirroring the turbulent period it came from. It was an era where art became a sensory feast, almost theatrical in its expression, designed to awe and engage.

Amelia's eyes traced the frame's wild beauty. Every inch told a story of excess, particularly in two striking patterns that kept appearing. Bold, swirling acanthus leaves held tight at each corner, which was a Baroque staple symbolizing immortality and enduring life. Additionally, detailed scrollwork featuring motifs of shells and floral designs all added to its texture, and highlighted scientific advancements and new discoveries of the time.

The frame's inner border, with its more understated carvings, offered a contrast to the bolder elements of the outer design and drew the eye towards the faded painting within. Yet, for Amelia, it was the frame itself that stood out as the true masterpiece.

After giving Amelia a moment to fully take in the piece, Geneviève gestured towards the frame with affectionate reverence. "Pieces like this... they carry with them so many untold stories just waiting to be revealed by the right hands. That's where your talent shines, Amelia."

Standing before it, the frame seemed to pull Amelia in, refusing to be merely observed. Like all things Baroque, it demanded complete immersion. This piece was not just seen. It was experienced.

She acknowledged Geneviève's comment with a nod while her fingers gently traced the contours of the frame. She let her touch follow every ridge and groove of the detailed carvings, exploring the intricate patterns and noting where the gold leaf had chipped away, exposing the bare wood beneath. Her eyes, trained with the precision of an art restorer, took in every detail. She observed the way the light played on the raised swirls, the deep shadows found inside the crevices, and the faint signs of its former splendor, now softened by time. "It feels like it has seen more than we can imagine," she said. "The care that went into every detail... it's incredible."

Geneviève's gaze flickered, as if recalling something. "Yes... it makes you wonder, doesn't it? Where it's been, who has touched it, and how it ended up here."

Amelia looked up, intrigued by Geneviève's choice of words, but before she could comment, Geneviève smiled warmly and rose from her

chair. “I won’t keep you from your work any longer. I just had to bring this to you as soon as I found it.” Her eyes sparkled with a mixture of excitement and relief, knowing she had placed the frame in the right hands.

Amelia stepped back for a moment, taking in the frame as a whole. In her mind’s eye, she envisioned the restoration process: the careful cleaning, the repair of the damaged areas, and the nuanced task of bringing back its lost luster without diminishing its historical integrity.

“It will be a pleasure to work on this!” Amelia said, filled with genuine enthusiasm. This was more than just a job; it was a journey into the past and a chance to breathe new life into a piece of art that had witnessed centuries of change. The frame wasn’t just a border for a painting; it was a story in itself, waiting to be told and Amelia had every intention of telling this story to anyone who would hear it. “I’ll take good care of it, I promise.”

Geneviève smiled again, this time more lightly. “I know you will, my dear. Whenever you get around to it. There’s no one else I trust with something like this.”

With a brief, graceful nod, Geneviève made her way to the door, leaving the scent of lavender and aged parchment in her wake. The door’s gentle chime echoed behind her, returning the studio to its familiar, quiet rhythm.

Amelia ran her fingers over the delicate swirls once more, then stepped back, already excited about the challenge of restoration ahead. “It *will* be a pleasure to work on this,” she murmured to herself again, filled with determination.

With a soft exhale, she returned to the back room, the lingering scent of history and possibility trailing behind her.

## Chapter 2

A few days had passed since Madame Geneviève Laurent's visit, and in that time, Amelia Beckett had spent hours preparing for the delicate restoration ahead. In the mellow light of her studio, with the autumn sun coming in through the windows, she stood before the ornate frame that had consumed her thoughts. Today, she would finally begin breathing new life into it.

The Baroque period had always fascinated Amelia, its pieces embodying a sense of fearlessness and defiance. A far cry from the restraint of the Renaissance before it, Baroque art surged with movement and energy, drawing viewers into its complex layers of emotion and narrative.

As she prepared her tools—brushes, pigments, and solvents—she wondered about the frame's history. Most-likely crafted in the late 1600s, it would have been a product of stormy times. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church turned to art, wielding it like a weapon to reclaim its power and speak to the hearts of its followers.

While Amelia respected the history, she was drawn not by the Church's influence but by the raw artistry that had emerged from it. It was a testament to human creativity and how artists could push beyond the limits of the time. Everything about this piece let the world know it was designed for full impact.

However, as Amelia began cleaning the surface, she noticed an unusual material peeking through areas where some of the gold had flaked away. Even this material was unique for such a unique piece. It was not the typical gesso or bole usually found in frames of this period, but something else. Something rarer.

With a magnifying glass, she examined the material and found a faint glint of iridescence beneath the layers of dust and decay. It was mother-of-pearl, the smooth, lustrous inner layer of certain mollusk shells, celebrated for its shimmering play of colors. Hints of whites, pinks, and soft blues danced subtly across its surface, delicately inlaid into the

frame with remarkable precision, adding a subtle yet mesmerizing radiance.

Among all the bold, golden excess typical of Baroque frames, this delicate mother-of-pearl detail stood apart. Its rarity and fragility during the period made it a prized material, a minor detail that elevated the frame from beautiful to extraordinary.

Curious and intrigued, Amelia realized that such a restoration would require not just skill but also the right materials, faithful to its original craftsmanship.

Finding the right mother-of-pearl would be tricky. The type used centuries ago had a unique character to them, a wild, natural beauty that modern harvesting had somehow tamed away. And the craftsmanship of the Baroque period was precise. Without these period-accurate materials, the restoration could lose its authenticity and betray the integrity of the original frame's design.

Resolved to find the perfect match, Amelia's mind turned to the one place she knew could possibly offer the rare materials she needed: the *Marché aux Puces*, an antique flea market located just outside the heart of Paris.

The market twisted and turned like a living thing, its cobblestone paths weaving drunkenly between countless eclectic stalls. Corrugated metal doors, often rusted from years of use, slid open to reveal treasures hidden behind them—everything from antique furniture to forgotten trinkets.

Stacks of old wooden crates and weathered boxes lined the paths, spilling over with vintage fabrics, aged books, and odd curiosities curling with time. Steeped in history and mystery, the market seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions, and each narrow turn offered a new discovery to those who knew where to look.

She also knew her decision to visit the sprawling flea market was more than a practical necessity; it was steeped in personal relevance.

As a child, shortly after her family expatriated to Paris from Boston, the *Marché* had become a place of wonder and excitement. A place where she and her father would spend entire weekends wandering through the maze of vendors just to see what interesting things they could find.

For young Amelia, the market was an endless trove of forgotten relics, with every turn revealing something new—a worn tapestry, a tarnished silver locket, or a mysterious artifact that seemed to echo the past.

Her father, an art history professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, would tell her, “Amelia, every piece here has a story waiting to be told... waiting for the right person to uncover it.”

Together, they played games of hide and seek among the towering stacks of furniture and bins filled with old postcards and photographs. Amelia would squeeze herself between dusty armoires or under tables laden with vintage lamps and books, her giggles muffled by piles of old fabrics.

During these visits, her father would encourage her to pick one item—any item that caught her eye. It didn’t matter if it was a broken watch, a faded painting, or a chipped porcelain doll. The real find was in the stories they imagined for these objects. “Who might have owned this? What tales could this old watch tell us if it could speak?” her father would muse, sparking Amelia’s imagination.

These early experiences at the Marché planted something in Amelia’s heart—a hunger for history that grew with each treasure hunt, with each brush against the past.

Even as she grew up and her interests turned more towards art restoration, the flea market remained her go-to for inspiration and materials that were not just rare but full of history.

Now, as a professional restorer in search of Baroque-era mother-of-pearl, Amelia knew the Marché was her best chance. The market had grown since her youth, but its essence remained unchanged.

After not visiting for a few years, she felt a hint of excitement at the thought of returning, not just as a seeker of materials, but as an explorer, rekindling her childhood wonder.

She packed her essentials—magnifying glass, gloves, a notebook, and a sample of the material she needed—then set out, a thrill building as she approached the entrance. The chipped blue *Vernaison* market sign greeted her like an old friend, its porcelain white letters still brightly visible, just as she remembered.

As she crossed the threshold into the maze of stalls, the market was already alive with energy, its narrow, winding paths brimming with forgotten stories and hidden treasures. The vendors, a mix of weathered vet-

erans and eager newcomers, arranged their wares under the dim morning light.

Surrounded by this activity, Amelia slowed, letting the familiar sights and sounds wash over her. She just stepped into another world—one where history lingered, the atmosphere itself drawing her deeper into the labyrinth.

A shiver ran through her, that sense of discovery from her early years returning.

Today, something was waiting.



# Chapter 3

*Paris, 1932*

The grand halls of Château Bourget shimmered under the glow of crystal chandeliers, their light reflecting off polished marble floors and the golden frames of exquisite paintings. The air buzzed with a hum of admiration and whispered conversation, highlighted by the occasional clink of glasses. While the evening drew Parisian elite, art collectors, and artists to its doors, the Bourget family's hospitality ensured the château remained a welcoming haven for all who shared a love of culture and history. It was a night to celebrate art, and every corner of the château told a story of pride and creativity.

Arnaud Bourget stood in the heart of it all, a glass of champagne in hand, watching as guests floated through the gallery. At thirty-four, he had spent years honing his skills in the family merchant business, mastering the art of negotiation, and securing rare goods from far corners of Europe. Tonight's event, in a way, was a testament to his efforts—an exhibition that seamlessly blended contemporary and classical pieces, bringing together works from established masters and promising new artists. It should have filled him with pride. But as he stood beneath a towering portrait of his great-grandfather, Jules Bourget, the family patriarch and visionary collector, Arnaud felt only a restless, gnawing discontent.

He scanned the room, his eyes lingering on familiar faces—longtime patrons who had supported the Bourgets' efforts to nurture emerging artists, and new ones eager to be part of a legacy rooted in culture and creativity. The château, with its sprawling halls and curated art collection, was a symbol of everything his family had built over centuries. But to Arnaud, it also felt like a gilded cage. His heart wasn't in the family business deals that filled his days; it was in this—in the art—and in the vibrant energy of Montmartre, the heart of Parisian creativity, where ideas and inspiration flowed as freely as the wine in tonight's celebration.

From across the room, Lucien Bourget, Arnaud's father, approached with a broad, proud smile. Lucien's presence was commanding, his tailored suit hinting at both elegance and authority. He embodied a quiet duality, proudly declaring himself French first yet never losing sight of the Jewish heritage that shaped the Bourget family's values and resilience. This duality defined his life's work as well, where he spent decades balancing two worlds—business and art—ensuring that the wealth accumulated from the first could nurture the second.

As he drew closer, Arnaud watched his father's eyes soften as they fell upon a Surrealist painting by one of Paris's emerging talents, a young Spaniard named Dalí. It was a work that Arnaud had personally selected for the exhibition.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Lucien said, nodding toward the painting. "I can see why you insisted on this one. There's something... raw about it. The kind of potential your great-grandfather would have spotted." His gaze shifted to Arnaud, his expression warm yet measured. "You've done well, son."

Arnaud's chest tightened. "Thank you, Father," he replied, though his voice was tinged with something less than gratitude. "I'm... glad you approve."

Lucien's smile held, but there was a knowing glint in his eyes. "I do. You've been a vital part of everything we've achieved this year. The new deals, these exhibitions—it's all because of your dedication." He paused, his tone shifting, becoming more pointed. "But soon, you'll need to focus more on the business. You're ready to take on more responsibility, to lead."

Arnaud stiffened, the words heavily settling over him. He had known this conversation was coming, but it didn't make it any easier to hear. "I've done everything you've asked of me, Father. I've expanded the business, secured new trade routes, and kept the accounts in order. But the art... that's where my heart is. It's what makes the Bourget name matter."

Lucien's eyes darkened, his smile fading slightly. "And it always will," he said, his voice low and firm. "But the art cannot survive without the business that supports it. Our family has built something remarkable, a blend of culture and commerce. That balance has kept us strong."

Arnaud clenched his jaw, as frustration flashed across his face. "Balance?" he repeated, his tone sharper than he intended. "What bal-

ance? I've spent my days negotiating contracts and calculating profits. That's not who I am. You know I belong out there," he said, gesturing toward the paintings, "finding new talent, bringing their work to life. That is the true Bourget legacy."

Lucien sighed, glancing around the room as if to draw strength from the opulent surroundings. "And who do you think made that possible?" he asked, his voice tinged with a hint of sadness. "Your grandfather built this family's fortune by understanding that art and industry could coexist. Without the business, we would have nothing. No gallery, no exhibitions, no legacy."

The argument between father and son seemed to echo through the gallery, even though they kept their voices low. To the guests, it was merely a private conversation between two men of the same bloodline, but to Arnaud, it felt like a battle for his soul. "I can't live a life chained to an office, Father," he said, his voice shaking with the force of suppressed emotion. "I want to immerse myself in the world of art, to be part of it. Not just fund it from afar."

Lucien's eyes hardened, the warmth that had been there moments ago cooling. "The family needs you to be more than a dreamer, Arnaud. We need you to lead."

Arnaud's heart pounded, frustration boiling over as he felt the walls closing in. He had always known his father's expectations, but the reality of them felt suffocating. "Maybe I don't want to lead," he said, the words slipping out before he could stop them. "Maybe... I just want to be free."

For a moment, there was silence between them, a chasm that neither seemed willing to bridge. Lucien's face was impassive, but Arnaud could see the hurt in his eyes, the sting of betrayal. Without another word, Arnaud turned sharply and walked away, his steps echoing through the gallery.

He didn't look back as he strode out of the château, past the glittering guests and the grand displays, past the paintings that had brought him so much joy. He knew he was leaving behind more than a room full of people—he was distancing himself from a life he no longer wanted to live, a legacy that now felt like a shackle around his heart.

Outside, the night was cool and crisp, and the lights of Paris twinkled in the distance. Arnaud found his driver, his breath visible in the chilly air as he leaned down to speak. There was only one place he wanted to go, one place that still felt like it belonged to him.

“Montmartre,” he said, the word escaping his lips like a sigh of relief.

As the car pulled away, the grand silhouette of Château Bourget loomed behind him, an elegant, imposing reminder of everything he was trying to escape.

But as the city streets blurred past, Arnaud felt something awaken within him—a spark of excitement, a sense of freedom that was raw and untamed. What he had just done felt good. He was breaking the rules, stepping outside the lines, and for the first time in years, he didn’t care. Tonight, he wasn’t the Bourget heir, bound by tradition and duty. He was simply a man chasing the passion and freedom he craved.

The car sped toward Montmartre, its vibrant, chaotic energy pulling him in, calling him home.

**Intrigued? The story is just beginning...**

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