

*Noble Romance Publishing*



G.R. Bretz

Noble Romance Publishing, LLC



[www.nobleromance.com](http://www.nobleromance.com)

Absinthe Eyes and Other Lies

ISBN 978-1-60592-052-8

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Absinthe Eyes and Other Lies Copyright 2009 G.R. Bretz

Cover Art by Fiona Jayde

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any existing means without written permission from the publisher. Contact Noble Romance Publishing, LLC at PO Box 467423, Atlanta, GA 31146.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The characters are products of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

### **Book Blurb**

When a legend lingers for centuries there's usually a bit of truth to it. For two hundred years people have whispered about the green fairy that lives in bottles of absinthe. Drink up. If you're lucky you may see her. If you're very lucky you may catch her. No one should ever be that lucky. Ask David, Vincent and Richard; three men with a few things in common. They have found inspiration. They have met the Muse. They have taken Dahlia to their hearts and to their beds. It cost them their sanity and their lives. If Stephen isn't very careful he's going to be number four.

### **Author's Note:**

#### ***Absinthe***

Absinthe is a distilled spirit with a high alcohol content, (thirty to eighty percent). It's made from anise and a blend of herbs which gives it a distinctive licorice taste. It is also a mild hallucinogen. The psychoactive ingredient in absinthe is thujone (wormwood extract). Thujone is a mild toxin which can be harmful if consumed in large quantities. The first symptom of thujone poisoning is the appearance of yellow blotches floating in front of the eyes.

## Absinthe Eyes and Other Lies

Absinthe originated in the canton of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. In 1805 Pernod Fils began distilling absinthe in eastern France. It quickly gained popularity and was affectionately dubbed "la fée verte" (the Green Fairy).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Green Fairy became the darling of Paris' bohemian artists and writers. It was praised for its ability to free the mind and overcome artistic inhibitions. Famous absinthe drinkers include Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Monet and, most notably, Vincent van Gogh.

In 1915 absinthe was banned in the US and most of Europe; though the drink continued to be available on the black market. In the 1990's the EU lifted the ban, with strict controls of thujone levels. In 2007 the ban was lifted in the US.

The Green Fairy has returned.

\* \* \*

### *Vincent*

Vincent van Gogh suffered from bouts of mental illness for his entire life. He drifted in and out of sanity, and from job to job. Eventually, he became too mad to employ and subsisted on an allowance from his older brother.

Vincent began painting in 1882. Four years later he moved to Paris where he met the Impressionist painters, and the Green Fairy. In the next two years he painted 200 masterpieces. He left us brief glimpses of the world seen through the eyes of a madman.

Many art historians and medical researchers believe that thujone poisoning explains the predominance of yellow in his Impressionist era paintings. He gave us yellow stars, yellow flowers, yellow wheat fields. He saw the world through a yellow fog and he painted what he saw.

In July, 1890, at the age of 37, Vincent van Gogh died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. There would be no more starry nights.

Strap yourself in. Get ready for the ride of a lifetime. Welcome to Vincent's world. Come kiss the Green Fairy; if you dare.

### *Part 1: Absinthe Eyes*

The sun burned out this morning. Did it think that I would care? I have lost so much more. I lose it over and over again with every tortured moment of my pointless existence.

Let a billion stars flare up and fade to black. Let galaxies collide and

wreak havoc across the cosmos. It's nothing to me. My course is charted, my destiny is fixed. I'll lie here forever, holding her lifeless body next to mine. I will spend eternity lost in her absinthe eyes.

I have no cause to complain; the punishment fits the crime. For I killed her; as surely as if I had taken a blade and driven it deep between those breasts I so loved to fondle. No, that would have been kinder, quicker. What I did was so much worse. I sucked the life from her, one heartache at a time. I took and took until there was nothing left but an empty shell and milky-green tears floating in absinthe eyes.

We lived a lie, and the lie was that it could ever have ended differently. I knew from the first moment that her frail spirit could never withstand the torments I would pour upon it. She needed me to need her, but she could never be all that I needed her to be.

I had no right to ask.

She had no right to offer.

\* \* \* \* \*

I shouldn't come here on Saturday nights. I know better. The patio bar is always packed with the local crowd doing the beach club circuit; so many of them and always so loud, so relentless in their pursuit of something to fill their empty, meaningless lives. They're fools and she is the biggest fool of them all: beautiful enough to get in with a fake ID, foolish enough to think that was worth doing.

I sit at the end of the bar and mix my own drink; absinthe fiends are particular about that. I watch the sharks circle and I have seen it all before. They will try to separate her from her friends and she will be theirs if they do.

*"Dance with me, Dahlia."*

*"Come sit at our table."*

*"Let's walk on the beach, Dahlia."*

She is trying to choose. She thinks she has to. She can't see that there is nothing from which to choose.

I have to say something.

"Has anyone ever thought that the universe might be nothing more than a figment of our imagination?" I ask.

The crowd is annoyed, angry that I've interrupted their game.

"Shut up, old man. You're drunk."

"What of it?" I mutter. Guilty as charged; I am very old, and very drunk, and still more than a match for the likes of them. I'd offered her a lifeline. Does she see it? Will she grab it?

She turns on her stool and smiles at me; lips thick, full and cherry red, eyes as green and clear as absinthe.

"I have," she says. "I think about it all the time."

Her friends are surprised; she had the pick of the room and she chose me. I hear the whispers.

"Seriously, Dahlia, he's old enough to be your father."

What do they know? I'm old enough to be her grandfather. If they think that will make any difference, they don't know her . . . not really. But I do.

She slides off the barstool and her short, black skirt is pushed all the way to her waist. I stare at her thin, red panties and I scowl. It's too much. She shouldn't put herself that far out there. Not around them, not around me. Especially not around me. Then I smile. At least she's wearing panties; her friends probably aren't. Let nothing stand in the way of reckless restroom romance. She walks toward me, hips swaying dangerously, short, jet-black hair shimmering cobalt-blue under the tropical moon.

Her arm comes up in front of her. She's reaching to me. She is grabbing the lifeline.

"I'm Dahlia," she whispers.

Her voice fills me like wind chimes kissing in the breeze.

"You certainly are," I reply. "I'm David."

I take her hand in mine: so cool, so soft and smooth. How will I ever let go?

She smiles again. I am lost in that smile, captured by those lips, those eyes. Surely I will be swept out by the riptide, but I just don't care.

"I've heard of you," she says. "You're the writer."

I nod. There was a rumor going around to that effect. Did I start it? It has been a very long time since I have felt like a writer. It has been a very long time since I have felt like anything more than another bottle of absinthe.

The boys are angry. The prize has been snatched out of their hands and they will not be easily parted with it. The biggest and boldest steps forward to challenge me. He cannot see that the battle is already lost. He does not understand her. He wants her; they all want her, but I need her, and she so desperately needs to be needed.

"Come on, Dahlia; don't waste your time on this drunken loser," he says.

My pistol is out in a flash. It's seen the night air before. The beauty of the Colt .32 caliber revolver is that the barrel will fit into the nostril of the average man. Of course, it tears flesh on the way in. His blood rolls down the silver-plated barrel; it spills across my knuckles.

From the corner of my eye I see the barmaid and I shake my head. She has seen my pistol before, but it doesn't matter. I drink top-shelf liquor, I tip well and I've never actually shot anyone in front of her. She won't call the police.

"Fuck off, little boy," I warn him. "I killed a hundred men before you were born. You don't mean shit."

It's a lie. I've never killed anyone. I don't know how, but I'm willing to learn and that counts for something. I cock the hammer. He dislodges his nose from the end of my pistol and moves away, grumbling empty threats of retaliation. They mean nothing and he knows it. He is a privileged child; he has

everything and everything in front of him. He can't contend with a man who has nothing to lose; nothing but cherry-red lips and absinthe eyes.

"What are you drinking?" I ask.

She holds her glass up in front of her and spins it around until the ice cubes clink against the sides. She laughs. "Diet Sprite."

Of course; the fake ID would get her through the door, but the barmaid won't really serve her alcohol. I will, and nothing will be said about it. It's a business.

I fill the stainless steel jigger to the very top. Absinthe is not tossed back like cheap bourbon. It has to be prepared. There's a ritual and the ritual is an essential part of the experience. I pour the absinthe into a glass and lay the long, flat spoon across the top. I fill the jigger with ice water and put a sugar cube on the spoon.

"Watch this," I say.

She leans forward and her eyes are reflected in the spoon: absinthe green below, absinthe green above, and me caught in the middle, halfway between heaven and hell. I pour the water over the sugar cube. The absinthe turns an opaque milky-green. The sugar cube dissolves and drips through the holes in the spoon. We watch as sugar drops rain down on the absinthe like the tears of a lesser god. Our heads are so close that our hair is touching. She is cinnamon and nutmeg dancing on the sea breeze.

We sip absinthe and make small talk. She is ship's crew on a private yacht. It sails tomorrow. We have all night, but it's not enough. It will never be enough. She is more than my desire; she is my muse. I have waited a lifetime for her. I will not stand idly by while the high tide carries her out to sea.

"I have a cottage just down the beach," I tell her. "Why don't you stay with me for awhile? There will always be another ship, another job. There will never be another now."

It is wisdom sufficient to the needs of the moment.

"Are you going to get me drunk and take advantage of me?" she asks.

I nod; that was the game plan.

She stands up, puts the glass to her lips and finishes it in one long, salacious gulp. She smiles.

"Good luck with that, David. I hope you can hold your absinthe."

I can but so can she.

\* \* \* \* \*

Four hours later and we're in my living room, surrounded by empty bottles and clinging to the last full one. We sit on a faux fur rug in front of a faux fireplace and gaze out the bay window at a very real ocean. It's why I live here. I need something real in my life, even if it's only an ocean.

She holds her glass out.

"One more time," she says.

I pour carefully but the spent bottles weigh heavy on my head. The absinthe spills onto her thigh. I bend over and lick it from her skin. It's our last bottle. I will not waste a drop of the precious liquid. I will not stop when I have captured it all. I push her skirt up and she shivers. I feel her hands soft and cool on the top of my head.

"Is this the part where you take advantage of me?" she asks.

I grab her throat and shove her back onto the rug. It is a dangerous game she's playing. I sit astride her and pin her hips to the floor. She's frightened. I can feel it in her quickening pulse; I can see it in her absinthe eyes. She's frightened and she needs her fear. Worse still, I need her fear. It stirs me to life and goads me to action.

I tear her blouse open. The buttons bounce across the hardwood floor and clink against the empty bottles; more wind chime whispers. I take her nipple between my teeth. I bite down gently and tug at it. She whimpers and sighs. She



runs her fingers through my hair.

“I’ve never done this before,” she whispers.

How many times have I heard that? But I look in her eyes and I know that it’s true, and I almost wish it wasn’t.

“I’ll be gentle,” I tell her.

Empty promises cost nothing. I lie and she knows it. The need is too strong, the urgency too great. I no longer remember how to be gentle, not with Dahlia.

My hand is still wrapped tight around her throat. She puts hers on top of it and strokes it lightly. I will not loosen my grip and she doesn’t want me to. She wants me to squeeze harder, and I will, but not just yet.

“Be gentle if you wish,” she says. “But don’t do it for me.”

She’s too confident, too sure of herself. She has proven that she can out-drink me. She thinks that she can out-fuck me. Good luck with that, Dahlia. I fuck harder than I drink.

With my free hand I tear her panties from her and pitch them across the room. They land on the floor with the empty bottles. I press hard against her. She puts her feet flat on the floor and raises her hips. She wants me, she needs me. She needs me to need her and I do.

I press harder and she tenses, but it’s only her flesh that resists. Her spirit screams her anxious desire. Harder still and I am inside her, safe, sheltered from the storm. She cries out and claws at my back. I have lost more blood to less worthy endeavors. She’s in pain. It’s written in milky-green tears floating on absinthe eyes. I need her pain as badly as I need her fear. She is my muse. She must suffer for my art.

I’ve spent three years at the beach waiting for my next novel to wash ashore. It finds me now, of all moments. The story spills from her eyes in a hundred salty-sweet pages. I lick them from her cheeks. I will not lose one precious milky-green tear. She wraps her legs around me and pulls me closer,

deeper. She would rather impale herself than wait on my clumsy sense of timing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, I hold her close and wait for sleep to claim her. I slip out from underneath her and turn on the computer. I must get it down while it's still fresh in the salt on my tongue. I must vomit her tears onto the page while they still mean something worthwhile.

I see her reflected in the mirror. She lies there naked and wounded; and the tears stream down her cheeks. Dear God, she sleeps and still she weeps. Was ever a man so blessed?

\* \* \* \* \*

Later still, I wake to the sound of her screaming and I rush to the patio. She is standing on the deck chair, stark-naked and absolutely terrified.

"Make it go away," she screams.

There's a large iguana on the corner of the wooden deck. It's at least three feet from head to tail; not unusual for this vicinity.

"It's just a lizard," I tell her.

She squats down and puts her hands on her shoulders.

"I've seen lizards before," she says. "That's a fucking dragon. Get rid of it."

Little old dragon-slayer me: I pick up a broom and make a half-hearted swing at it. It jumps off the deck and scurries away. I don't like iguanas any more than she does. They shit all over the place and they give me the creeps. I used to shoot the little bastards, but the neighbors complained. I can't imagine why.

I hold my hand out to her, but she shakes her head. She's afraid to get down, there might be more.

"Come on inside," I tell her. "No dragons in there."

She stands up and holds her arms out to me. She wraps them around my neck and I carry her inside, deposit her gently on the floor. It is littered with empty bottles and assorted articles of clothing.

"Quite a night," she says.

I smile and nod. It definitely was.

She looks at me, eyes full of uncertainty.

"This is awkward," she says. "Did we?"

I step back and put my hand on my forehead. This is not happening. I can feel my testicles shrinking. They will probably crawl up inside me any moment.

She bursts into laughter.

"Just teasing," she says. "I remember everything."

Well, that's a relief, but it's still an awkward moment. Last night I knew exactly what my role was. This morning I'm not so sure. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say.

'Thank you' seems a little inadequate.

"Was it what you expected?" I ask instead.

"I wasn't expecting it to be that intense. It hurt." She presses her hand between her legs. "It still hurts."

"I'm sorry," I reply. "I get carried away."

She kisses me and strokes my cheek. Her mouth still tastes of absinthe. Her hand is sweet with the scent of our passion.

"It's okay," she whispers.

And there the lie begins, because it's not okay that she hurts. It's not okay that I need her to. It will never be okay, but we will pretend that it is.

\* \* \* \* \*

My publisher calls to congratulate me. She loves everything except the story line. It's entirely too absurd to be believable. Well, that's not a problem. That plotline came to me in a moment of drunken passion. I'm versatile and mercantile; I can mold what I have written to fit a more conventional story. The important thing is that I have written sixty of the best pages of my career. It is an excellent start.

I tweak the manuscript. A few hours work and a bit of creative editing and it's a gothic romance novel in the works. I send it back to my publisher.

She swears it's the best I've ever written. Of course it is. It was paid for with blood and tears, absinthe and agony. It was written in remorse, with Dahlia as my inspiration. She is my muse.

And Dahlia is pleased with what I am writing, but it's not the story she wanted me to tell. It's not her story, but I don't really know her story. I only sense how it begins. As young as she is, I get the feeling that it begins a very long time ago.

Well, there will be plenty of time to write whatever it is Dahlia wants me to write.

But first I need to finish this novel. My publisher is already talking NY Times best seller list. I can be in late autumn what I never was in spring or summer. It's not just a matter of recognition; there are practical constraints. The so-called beachcomber lifestyle is very expensive to maintain. It's hard getting by on royalties from books that haven't really sold in years.

I get emails three times a day, begging for more, and demanding I finish what I have started. But there's nothing to give her. I'm not writing; haven't been for weeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sit on the porch and watch the waves roll ashore. I have a formula for sanity, an Rx for stability: Dutch weed, French absinthe and Celtic music. They have never failed me. Life is sweet and getting sweeter by the moment. Dahlia joins me on the porch. She's wearing tiny white panties and a bright red smile. White panties . . . she knows me too well.

"Not writing today?" she asks.

Why does she always ask that? What business is it of hers? Do I look like I'm writing?

She sits in my lap and wraps her arms around my neck.

"I can help," she whispers.

I grab her by the shoulders and shove her to the deck.

"I don't need you to write," I scream.

But it's a lie and we both know it.

"You're not here to help me write," I say. "You're here to help me come. If you want to be useful, suck my cock."

She winces. I know my words hurt her, but knowing isn't enough. I have to see it.

And already she is on her knees in front of my chair. There is nothing she won't do for me. I love her for the lengths she will go to please me. And I hate her for being that weak, for letting me be that weak.

She looks up at me.

"What happened?" she asks. "I used to be enough. We made love and you wrote. It was simple. What changed?"

Why did she have to ask? Why did I have to answer?

"It stopped hurting," I tell her. "You stopped being afraid. You stopped crying."

"Then hurt me, David. Scare me," she pleads. "Make me cry."

I stand up, lift her to her feet and hold her close. I will do no such thing, but it's too late. I have hurt her. She's frightened. She's crying. We'll make love

and I will write and the natural order will be restored. But Dahlia will die a little with every page, because they're not her pages; it's not her story. I know she'll forgive me for that, but how will I ever forgive myself?

\* \* \* \* \*

I sit in the living room, smoke a joint and sip absinthe. Emmylou is on the stereo. She's wailing her heart out. She can sparkle like a diamond, but she can never be gold; she can never be enough. I know the feeling; it's why I love her music.

Dahlia puts her hands on my shoulders. She bends over and kisses me on the cheek.

"It's Saturday night," she says. "Let's do something."

I take another hit of the joint and I stare at it. There's more wisdom in that glowing ember than can be held in a thousand ivory towers. I hold the joint up. She leans forward, puts her cherry-red lips around it and draws hard and long. She smiles and her absinthe eyes sparkle mischievously. She enjoys the pot, but she wishes it was me inside her mouth, and so do I.

I take a sip of absinthe and hold the glass up for her. She doesn't take it. She presses her lips against it, opens them, and waits for me to pour it in her mouth. That ritual never grows old, never loses its luster.

"I do so love you," I tell her.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders and rests her chin on my head. I can feel her breasts, soft and smooth against my neck. She devotes her every moment to proving that she loves me, but she has never said the words and I worry she never will. And that is my pain, my fear, my tears. Will they float milky-green and cloud my vision? Will they spill from my eyes? Will she lick them from my cheeks?

"We never do anything," she says. "We never go anywhere."

Of course we never go anywhere. She's mine and mine alone. I will not share her with the world. Here, in *our* world, she hangs on my every word and worries that she's not worthy of me. Out there, in that world of fools, she might look in the eyes of another man and realize that I've never been worthy of her.

"Let's go somewhere," she asks again.

I nod. Why not? She gives so much and asks so little in return. I have nothing better to do. I'm not writing, haven't been for weeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

I shouldn't come here on Saturday nights. I know better. The place is always packed with the local crowd doing the beach club circuit, but it's where she wants to be. She tells me it will be good for us. We'll visit the place where we met and we'll be reborn.

I think there is far more to it than that. She's retracing her steps. She's carefully investigating the circumstances of her on-going demise. She has dragged me back to the scene of the crime and I am not happy to be here.

Her friends still hate me, but they won't let it show. They're all smiles and glassy-eyed giggles. The blond one keeps finding reasons to touch me. She rubs her tits against my shoulder one too many times. She doesn't want anything from me. She only wants what Dahlia has. I grab her by the arm and drag her out the front door.

There is a long, black limo parked in the driveway. It's probably unlocked but I don't bother to check. There will be nothing intimate or private about this encounter. I take her to the front of the car and bend her over the hood. I reach under her skirt and I was right; she doesn't wear panties.

I pull my zipper down and kick her feet apart. It's all the foreplay we need. There's not a trace of tenderness; I have forgotten how to be tender. She puts her hands on the hood and pushes, trying to stand.

"You're hurting me," she cries out.

She's a fool. I don't care enough to hurt her. This has nothing to do with her. I'm hurting Dahlia. I always hurt Dahlia.

I grab her by the back of the neck and force her down. Her head bangs against the hood.

That's going to leave a mark. What do I care? It's not my car. She's not my woman.

Afterward, I fire up a joint. She stands there and waits for me to pass it to her, but I won't. It would be too much like sharing a kiss. We have already shared the only thing we ever will.

"You didn't have to be so rough," she says.

Rough? She has no idea. She's no Dahlia, but I never expected her to be.

"Are you still here?" I ask.

She slaps me hard before walking off. I suppose she wasn't done sharing.

I find Dahlia standing at the bottom of the stairs. She's holding a glass. Is it absinthe or has she cried that many tears in the few minutes it took me to humiliate her, to humiliate us.

Either way, I am thirsty. I take the glass from her hand.

She unhooks my buckle and pulls my belt from around my waist. She holds it high over her head and slams it hard against her leg. She fashions it into a noose, slips it around her neck and puts the loose end in my hand.

"Find a better way," she pleads. "Beat me, choke me; just stop tearing at my heart. I can't take it anymore."

I kneel before her. There is a bright, red welt forming on her thigh. I purse my lips and blow on it. I kiss it and press my cheek against it. If I could move it from her thigh to my face I would. I look up at her.

"I will finish it soon," I promise. "It will be over and there will be time for us."

She puts her hands on my head and strokes my temples with her fingers.



She will forgive me, she already has. She always forgives me. How can I forgive her for that?

I stick my head under her skirt. Her panties are white and so thin that I can taste her through them. I pull back the elastic and pour the absinthe down the front. She shivers. Already my face is pressed tight against her crotch, mouth wide open. I will not waste a precious drop . . . milky-green tears pouring from the gates of heaven.

I would never do that: physically hurt her. Granted, I'm a bit rough when it comes to sex, but I would never physically harm her. How shallow of me. Her body is a temple, I worship at it.

It's perfect and it brings me pleasure in so many ways. Of course I will do it no harm. Her mind, her heart, her spirit . . . they are all fair game when I need to write, and I always need to write.

\* \* \* \* \*

The weeks and months pass. The novel grows and we shrink. I hate it. It's not her story. It's swallowing us alive. If it weren't for the absinthe and the sex, we would have nothing. Lately, it's been more absinthe than sex. She lays there in bed, naked and willing. She begs me to come to her.

I promise I'll join her later. I sit at my keyboard and write, or pretend to write. If she bothers me again, I tell her to take a sleeping pill. I do join her, eventually, but usually long after she has fallen asleep.

Some nights she turns to me and I hold her body next to mine. Those are the perfect moments, because she's asleep and I'm too drunk to get it up. There's nothing sexual about it—just two human beings clinging to one another. Those are the perfect moments, because she's asleep and still she weeps.

Some nights I won't touch her. If she reaches for me I slide to the edge of the bed. I get up and pretend to go to the bathroom or pour another glass of

absinthe. We spend more time with the absinthe than we do with one another and we are both equally guilty of that crime. Yes, some nights I ignore her.

Ignoring her . . . that is the finest torment I have ever devised. I simply pretend that she's not there. If she does anything to make a sound, I turn and glare at her. So she learns not to do anything that will make a sound.

Ignoring her is an exquisite torment, because it tortures us both. There's nothing she wants more than to be held by me. There's nothing I want more than to hold her. I deny us this simple pleasure for the sake of my art.

The novel be damned. I grow weary of this. I grow weary of watching her grow weary. I will finish this tonight and I will not torment her to do it. If the ending sucks, let the editor fix it.

I want this to be over. I'll sell this place. We'll buy a real cabin by a real lake in a real forest.

We'll drink absinthe and make love and I'll write her story. I'll spend the rest of my life writing her story.

"Come to bed," she begs me. "I need you to be with me."

"Soon," I promise her. "Very soon."

She is standing beside me. She presses the pistol into my palm and puts the barrel against her forehead.

"End it," she says. "I can't take anymore. Just end it."

I stick the pistol in my waistband.

"I'm not going to kill you," I say. "The only thing I'm going to end is this fucking novel. I will finish it tonight."

She sighs and goes back to bed. How many times have I told her that? How many nights have I lied? My fingers flail at the keys. My fists pummel the keyboard. Why doesn't it shatter? I pour my heart and soul into this thing and still it's not finished. It will never be finished.

The night wears on. The sun rises, and her voice drifts to me on the morning breeze.

## Absinthe Eyes and Other Lies

"I love you, David. I have always loved you."

Wind chimes kissing in the breeze.

I turn off the computer. I wash my hands of this crime. This is finished.

It's not real. It doesn't matter. She loves me. That's real. That matters.

I lie beside her and pull her close to me. Her hands are too cold, her body too limp.

There is a bottle of absinthe and a bottle of sleeping pills on the nightstand. They are both empty and I am damned forever.

Dear God, Dahlia. No. Not now. We were so close. We could have had it all; if only you had waited a few more hours.

"Say it again," I beg her.

"I will love you forever," she whispers.

Her breath drifts across my face. It's soft and sweet, cinnamon and nutmeg on the sea breeze. It's her last breath. She grows cold. I pull her close. I must keep her warm. I must take this moment to make up for all the lost moments. I must hold her close and I must never let go.

Her eyes are still open and I cannot look away from them. I pull the pistol from my belt. I press the barrel to my temple and I squeeze the trigger. I will spend eternity lost in her absinthe eyes.

## Part 2: *Portrait of a Fool*

I have a hard-boiled egg and a piece of toast for breakfast. I grab three of my recent paintings and head straight for the gallery. The news is out; Henri has made four sales this past weekend. I'm hoping he will stay true to form and reinvest a bit of his profits.

I'm not the only starving artist to stumble onto that idea; and I'm not the first. There are five others waiting, canvases in hand. I know them all. They are my contemporaries, my comrades; they are my competition and they are very

good. It was unrealistic of me to bring three paintings with me. I'll be lucky to sell one.

But one will be enough. The money I'll receive will pay the rent on my small, fourth floor apartment. It will buy more canvas, paint and brushes. It will keep me drunk most nights and still leave a bit for food; an artist's life for me . . . if I can just convince him to buy one of my paintings. It's my eighth trip to his gallery and so far he has not bought one.

I have no idea why. Henri never offers criticism or opinion. He either buys or he doesn't. I've given much thought to the matter and there doesn't seem to be a pattern or a set of criteria to be met. It seems to be strictly a matter of whim. He's as fickle as his patrons, and he thinks that we are lazy men trying to get rich by slapping a little paint onto a canvas.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I paint to create beauty that will bring pleasure to the viewer. I paint so there will be something left of me when I am gone; something that says I was here. So many millions were and nearly all of them were forgotten. I paint so I will not be forgotten.

I see her standing on the other side of the room, contemplating some of the paintings on display. I can't believe it took me this long to notice her. I can't believe a hush didn't fall over the room the moment she walked in. She's strikingly beautiful and very well-proportioned. Her hair is black and woven into a long, thick braid that reaches to her waist. A man could climb to safety using only that braid. It appears that strong.

Everything about her seems to be that strong. Her shoulders are bare and smooth as polished marble. She is possessed of a classic beauty. Hers is the beauty and strength of the caryatids. If I could capture that on canvas, I would be remembered. At the very least, she would be remembered.

She senses my eyes are on her. I've always been clumsy about that sort of thing. The more beautiful the woman the clumsier I get. She turns around to face me. What was beauty in profile is rapture head on. Her skin is pale and

unblemished; her lips, thick and full, as red and ripe as cherries. Those eyes, dear God, those eyes; they are greener than spring, deeper than winter. They are as pale and clear as absinthe. I could get lost in those absinthe eyes forever.

She smiles and walks over to me.

"Are you a starving artist, Vincent?" she asks.

Astounding. She knows my name. She's heard of me and few people have. I nod. At the moment I'm between menial, low-paying jobs. I could do better, but I refuse to work at a career. My art is my career. Work is the unpleasant things I do to sustain my career.

She examines each of my paintings and shakes her head.

"I'm not surprised," she says.

Why didn't she just walk up and kick me in the groin? It would have been less painful.

She takes out a blue velvet purse and dangles it back and forth in front of my face.

"I think you will be a great artist," she says. "So I will buy a painting from you."

"Which one?" I ask.

She laughs.

"None of those," she replies. "First I will have to give you something worthy of painting."

She already has. I think she knows that. She understands she won't always be this young and beautiful. She wants me to capture the moment and preserve it forever. She asked the right man.

"Consider this an advance," she says.

She takes some coins from her purse and presses them into my palm. I'm not rude enough to count, but I can feel the weight. It's more than Henri would have given me for a completed painting.

"Do you have a studio?" she asks.

I like to call it that, but it's not and I'm too intimidated to be pretentious.

"I have an apartment," I reply.

She smiles.

"That will do," she says.

I scribble my address on a piece of paper and hand it to her. She rolls the paper into a loose cylinder, lifts the neckline of her dress and slides it between her breasts.

"I will come when it suits me to," she says.

By the time I stop staring at her breasts she's already gone. It occurs to me that I never thought to ask her name; and I would very much like to know.

I give a portion of my advance to a neighbor lady to do the laundry and clean my apartment. I want the place to look nice for her and I've never had any skill at housekeeping. I spend the afternoon at a sidewalk café with my friends. They are all jealous of me, but they won't let it show. They pretend not to have any idea who I'm talking about. Let them enjoy their little game; I'm sure it amuses them. I'm more than amused, I'm amazed. I will see her naked in front of me and get paid well for the pleasure.

Just knowing that I'll paint her has changed me; I hold my head higher than I have in years, I'm more confident and self-assured. People treat me differently, they remember my name. Unfortunately no one seems to remember hers, and I would very much like to know. I'm suddenly a celebrity, but fame is fleeting. The days and weeks pass and still she does not come. I've seen her a few times in the nightclubs. She is alone, always alone. She always smiles at me, but the message is clear. I am not to join her. She's to be admired, not approached.

She wears a loneliness born of great beauty. She is so much a woman that she could only be approached by an extraordinary man; and I have never been an extraordinary man. I had no reason to be, until I met her. Now I fear that it's too late. She is youth, she is beauty, she is a muse, and I am what I am. I will never be worthy of her.

I spend the afternoon contemplating various articles from my apartment; a vase of flowers, an empty vase, a bowl of fruit, a single pear. It's a waste of time. There is nothing in my humble abode that seems worthy of painting.

It's been three weeks since that morning at Henri's and I haven't put brush to canvas the entire time. There is only one thing I wish to paint. I put a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine on the table. It's past sunset and I haven't eaten since breakfast. If they don't inspire me to paint, perhaps they will inspire me to eat.

They do neither. An hour later and the canvas is still bare, the loaf of bread still intact. The bottle of wine is empty and I'm making excellent progress on a second. My world is warm and fuzzy and I'm at ease. So much so that I can't be certain what I hear. Is someone at my door or is it merely the shutter rattling in the wind? I set the bottle of wine on the table and listen closely; again, three sharp raps, this time louder, more insistent. Someone is at my door.

I stand up quickly and I have never been more profoundly aware that the world is round.

After a few moments it flattens again and I regain my balance. I walk to the door and open it.

There she stands, the object of my recent obsession. She's wearing a full-length white dress and she has a white, knit shawl around her shoulders. If she is here to pose, the dress will be coming off. The shawl I may leave on. It strikes such a sharp contrast with her long, black hair.

I invite her in and apologize for the unkempt state of the apartment and myself. I had cleaned up both for her, but that was three weeks ago and I can hardly be expected to maintain that condition on a daily basis.

"Did you come to pose?" I ask her.

She holds up a small wicker basket.

"I brought food," she replies. "You need to eat, Vincent. You're all skin and bones."

At the moment she's standing only a few inches from me. She smells of cinnamon and nutmeg. I can feel her breath on my face. I am certainly all bone.

We sit at the table and she brings out a sausage, a small wheel of Gouda cheese and a loaf of bread. The smell of the bread is so strong that it must be fresh from the oven. She puts a knife to the sausage and I have never seen anyone handle a blade so well. It moves so fast that it blurs.

In a matter of seconds half of the sausage is cut into thin slices. I cross my knees and try not to think about it.

She slices the cheese just as quickly. She holds the knife up in front of her, puts her tongue to the base of the blade and runs it all the way to the tip. She turns the knife over and repeats the process. I will treasure the memory. That is something worthy of painting.

"You're very good with a knife," I say.

She laughs.

"There's a trick to it," she replies. "Don't try it yourself. You'll cut off a finger."

She taps the blade against the side of the empty wine bottle.

"Or perhaps an ear," she says.

I blush, but I have a naturally ruddy complexion and so I hope she doesn't notice. She takes her shawl off and lays it across the back of the chair. Her shoulders are bare and the dress is cut low at the top. Her breasts are struggling to burst free from the bodice.

"I hope you don't go out in public dressed like that," I say. "Men will offer you money for your favors."

"I have my own money," she replies. "I don't need theirs."

Her clothing and her food are of the best quality. I have no trouble believing she is a wealthy young woman. She picks up the empty bottle and looks at the label.

"Port will not make you a great artist," she says.



She tilts the bottle toward her and sniffs the top.

“Especially not cheap port; have you ever heard of absinthe?” she asks.

I nod. I have heard of it. I’ve even had a glass of it on a few, rare occasions.

The taste is heavenly and heady, but it costs ten times what I pay for house wine. She pulls a bottle from the basket. It is the closest I have ever been to a full bottle of absinthe. The day was quite boring, but the evening looks as if it will be full of surprises.

She takes a small glass jigger and puts a full measure in each glass. She adds a jigger of water and a teaspoon of sugar to each. She stirs the drinks and hands one glass to me.

“Will it make me a great artist?” I ask.

She laughs and tosses her head. Her long, black hair kisses her bare shoulders. How many glasses before I can do the same? Are there enough glasses, enough bottles? She is quite the prize and prizes are not easily won.

“I will make you a great artist, Vincent,” she assures me. “The absinthe will make the task less arduous.”

Less arduous . . . not the most flattering review of my work. Still, she does have a point.

I have no identity as an artist. I mimic what others have done and try to add a part of me to that. It’s an arduous task, because I don’t really know who I am—not as an artist, not as a man. But I have no doubt that she can tell me.

It takes us more than an hour to finish the bottle. She has never looked more beautiful. Beyond the beauty that God has graced her with, there is a beauty the absinthe has added.

She is surrounded by a pale, green aura. It reaches out and tries to wrap itself around me. There are moments when her dress seems to dissolve and I can see the beautiful, naked body beneath.

“Do you like my dress?” she asks.

I smile and nod enthusiastically. I would like it much better lying in a pile

around her ankles.

"I'm not wearing anything beneath it," she says.

I grab my easel and drag it toward me. She is already defining me as an artist and a man; more artist than man, I think. Faced with two prospects, it is my spirit that cries out to me, not my groin. I must paint her. I must capture her on canvas. I must immortalize her.

"Put your paints away," she says. "I will not pose for you tonight."

I do not have time to be disappointed. She reaches around behind her and unhooks the buttons. Her dress slides silently to the floor. She walks to my chair, spreads her feet and lowers herself onto my lap. She wraps her arms around me and kisses me on the neck.

"Make love to me," she whispers. "Make love to me, Vincent, and I will give you something worthy of painting."

My head spins at the prospects; make love to her and then paint her. It will be the most profitable evening of my life. I try to stand, but I'm very drunk. It's going to take a minute; that's much too long for her. She unbuckles my trousers and I manage to lift my ass far enough for her to pull them to my ankles.

She grabs my cock and strokes and tugs until it swells in her hand. I was just beginning to get my balance back. Now the blood has rushed from one head to the other and I couldn't possibly stand up if I tried. But I don't need to. *She* doesn't need me to.

Her hips spin wild, wicked circles as she lowers herself onto me. I'm certain that I'm as deep inside her as I could ever be, but it's still not enough for her. She hooks her feet under the rungs of the chair and pulls herself deeper onto my cock.

She sways back and forth on my lap. I am her swing, her rocking chair. Her lip begins to tremble and her eyes roll back, two green suns setting. I pull her close and feel her breasts soft and cool against my chest. I pull her hair back

and kiss her ear, take the lobe between my teeth and tug at it. Her breath races across my ear in short, swift gasps.

Her chin is resting on my shoulder. She forces it deep into the hollow of my clavicle. Only a moment's pain, but there's a great deal of pain in that moment. It's very distracting. I was almost there. I'm certain she knew that and I'm not pleased with the delay.

I'm more artist than man. The needs of my cock are never greater than those of my spirit. I have a masterpiece in my hands. I must paint her, but I cannot until I have fucked her. So, fuck her I will.

Somehow, I find the strength to stand. It's only a few feet to the bed, but it seems like an ocean away. I carefully, gently lower us to the floor then I assail her with a fury I have never known.

I can feel her limp, lifeless response to my pounding. She liked it better when she was on top. She lets me go on for a while then she tightens her legs and holds me in place.

"It's not a race," she says. "I'm not a slab of meat. Don't be so rough."

I'm a little angry. Her desires are keeping me from my easel. Her lust is denying my passion.

"I want it to be rough," I reply.

She is so strong, so agile. She rolls and suddenly she's on top again. She looks down at me. I don't know what I expect to see in her eyes — fear, contempt, loathing. I certainly don't expect to see a look of glee, sheer joy.

"Do you, indeed?" she asks.

She reaches behind her and takes another bottle of absinthe from the basket. She holds it over me and tilts it. I open my mouth and await her blessing.

"You must never drink like this when you're alone," she warns me.

I intend to promise her that I won't, but my mouth is full before I can form the words. Her aim is precise and measured. She doesn't spill a single drop of her liquid lust. She dispenses her pleasant poison at just the right speed.

I hold my hands up. I've had all that I can take. The room is filled with a thick, yellow fog and I feel like I'm dissolving, becoming part of it.

The bottle is still half full. She puts it to her lips and finishes it much quicker than I finished my half, shoving her tongue into the bottle to catch the last few drops. I can see it, folded and stretched through the neck of the bottle.

Satisfied that she caught all of it, she pitches the bottle through the open window. There's a loud crash and the sound of glass bouncing and sliding across the cobblestone.

"Stop it, you drunken fool."

The voice is vaguely familiar. It's not the first bottle to go sailing through that window.

"Sorry," she hollers.

She's not. She's amused, and I'll be blamed for her vandalistic behavior.

"All right," she says. "Let's do some rough fucking."

She lifts herself until only the tip of my cock is still inside of her. She slams onto my groin like a landslide of flesh. My cock isn't that long. I wouldn't have thought it possible for her to build up so much momentum on such a short descent.

It shakes the room and sends a shudder through every bone in my body. There's a sharp crack and I'm frightened that it might be my spine. I wiggle my toes, delighted to find I still can.

A few more thrusts and the floor gives way. We fall into the restaurant below and land on one of the tables. I look up to see an elegant, matronly-looking woman with shock written on her face.

I'm sure she didn't expect to be served raw sex.

Another thrust and the table collapses. We fall to the floor. The woman and her dining companions scramble to safety.

There are several dozen diners in the restaurant and they quickly divide into two groups. Half of them turn their backs. They mumble about our

despicable depravity and insist that someone send for the police. The other half watch intently and cheer us on.

"That's the way, girl. Ride him like a horse."

I try to grab her breasts, but they are beyond my reach. She swells until she fills the room. She shrinks until she's so small that I can scarcely believe my cock will fit into her. The green spills from her eyes and paints her from head to toe. Gossamer-thin wings sprout from her back.

She flutters her wings and the air vibrates and hums. She spins in circles as she rides me. She fades to translucent and I can see my cock, twisted like a corkscrew inside of her. I grab her shoulders, pull her down and spill my seed into her.

She reaches down and pats my head.

"Good boy," she whispers.

She collapses onto my chest and I pass out with the sound of laughter and cheers echoing in my ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime later, I wake and am surprised to find myself in my bed. She's lying beside me with her head resting on my chest and her thigh draped over my cock. I'm a little surprised to find that I still have a cock. It was so nice of her to return it when she was finished.

I kiss her on top of her head and stroke her back. Oh no . . . her wings are gone and I did so love those wings.

"What time is it?" I ask.

She sighs so hard that her breath moves every hair on my chest. Of course, there aren't that many to move.

"It's now," she replies.

I smile. Her logic cannot be denied. It is when it is, and there's no

particular reason why I should be concerned with what time it is. It's not as if I can do anything about it. If I could, if I could slide it back and forth like a rosary bead, I know exactly what moment I would slide to, over and over again.

I stand up and am pleased to find that the world is flat. The room is still bathed in a pale, yellow haze. I make the mental effort to clear my vision. I must be very careful not to fall through the hole in the floor, again.

But that's not going to be a problem. The floor is dirty and stained, and coarse against my bare feet, but it is still very much intact.

"What the hell?"

She stands behind me and rests her chin on my shoulder; oh my, the memory of pain.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, as if she didn't know.

"I remember . . . ."

There's no point in continuing. The memory is very real, very vivid, but it's too expansive to frame with words. I would need a hundred paintings and most of them would be much too lewd to sell.

"I was there," she reminds me. "I know what you remember. That doesn't mean it really happened."

I nod; her words actually make sense to me. With each passing month, with each aching year, I find myself remembering more and more things that never really happened. Sanity, thou art a fickle mistress.

"I think it's time for you to paint," she says.

I couldn't agree more. It's most definitely time for me to paint.

I take the shawl from the back of the chair and hand it to her.

"Put this around your shoulders and lie on the bed, facing me," I tell her.

She tosses the shawl onto the bed; it's only a few feet from us. When I was sitting in the chair, with her impaled on my cock, it seemed an ocean away.

"I promised you something worth painting," she replies. "I'm not a thing."

She opens the double-doors and steps onto the small balcony. I'm sure the neighbors are enjoying that show.

"The city is too well-lit," she says. "I can't see the night sky. The lights of Paris have stolen the stars."

She steps inside and drags my easel to the doorway.

"Paint the night," she says. "Paint the night for me and fill it with stars."

I fill my brush with blue-black and draw my arm back. I am prepared to assault the naked canvas. She stops in front of me before I make a mark.

"Long sweeping strokes will not do," she says. "Paint the way you fuck, Vincent; thousands of short, swift strokes. I am the canvas; make love to me again."

She pulls another bottle of absinthe from the basket and I move paint from palette to canvas. Two hours and eight glasses later and I'm pleased with the results. She is not. She thinks the stars are too dull and lifeless.

She runs her fingers across my face and her fingertips pull my eyelids closed. It's not a difficult task. I feel her forearms resting on my thighs. I feel her mouth around my cock. It's soft and wet and warm . . . and urgent, ever so urgent. Her tongue is wrapped around me like a vine around a lamppost. I open my eyes and all I can see is the top of her head. It's the most beautiful sight I have ever beheld.

After a few minutes she stops and looks straight in my eyes.

"Make the stars bigger, Vincent," she whispers. "Make them swell in the sky the way you swell in my mouth."

She opens her mouth and lowers her head. She returns to her task and I to mine. Two more glasses and both are finished. The stars burst onto the canvas and I explode in her mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

She doesn't like it here in Paris. She wants to move to Arles in the south. She insists it will be good for my health, which has not been that good of late; neither physical nor mental. She never says it. No one ever says it, but I do know. I am quite mad. I can no longer distinguish reality from fantasy and I don't care. She has kept her promise. I am creating works of great beauty. They will withstand the test of time. They will be works of art. Insanity is a small price to pay.

I invite my friends to accompany us to Arles. Most of them are content to remain here in Paris, but Paul accepts the offer. I'm so grateful for the companionship of another painter. He and his wife, Sophie, join us in Arles.

Dahlia has changed the way I paint. I used to do portraits, as Paul now does. But Dahlia brought nature to my canvases. My paintings used to be dark and dreary, full of grays and browns and blacks. She brought color to my brush, especially yellow; yellow stars, yellow sunflowers, yellow wheat fields beneath stormy skies. I paint so much yellow that I see yellow spots floating in front of my eyes. Even when they are closed. Especially when they are closed. She encourages me to paint everything in nature, except for her – not nude, not even fully dressed. She is so accommodating in every other aspect, but she will not bend on that. I'm forbidden to paint her, but I know that someday I must. I will never be complete until I have.

I know that I'm creating works of art, and I'm creating them by the dozen. They are poignant pictures of the world seen through the eyes of a madman. As a painter, I've never been more prolific, but it doesn't change my situation. I have been painting for twenty-five years and I have yet to sell a single one. I want to move back to Paris. I have enough paintings to fill Henri's gallery; surely a few of them would sell.

She thinks I lust after fortune and fame. I lust only for life, for her. She says I love my money more than I love her. Ridiculous: I have no money to love. My paintings don't sell. I have become much too mad to employ. I survive on a



modest allowance from my family and most of that is spent on absinthe.

The weeks grow into months and my relationship with Paul and Sophie is strained. I don't like the way they treat her. If I speak of her to Paul he laughs and tells me I drink too much absinthe. Of course I do, but why does he always avoid talking about her. If I mention her to Sophie I am assured of an instant reaction. Sometimes she puts her hands on her hips, her face grows hard and she glares at me. Other times her expression softens, she puts her hands on my shoulders and stares at me with that 'poor Vincent' look in her eyes.

It would drive me mad if I weren't already there. They seem intent on ignoring her. They pretend she doesn't exist and she is ever so accommodating. She makes herself scarce. She only comes around when they are away, or in the still of the night, when they are asleep. She wakes me. We drink absinthe and make love. Then I paint, from the depths of my twisted, tortured soul.

She comes to me one afternoon when Paul and Sophie are in town. We drink for a few hours, and then she takes my hand and guides me to the bedroom. The pillows are piled at the top of the bed. She takes off her dress and lays down with her back to me. She pulls her knees up and I take her from behind. She has had too much to drink. After we finish she falls asleep and I am left to my own devices, such as they are.

I pour another glass of absinthe, sit in the chair and contemplate her naked body. Her head is resting on her bent arm. Her long braided hair runs across her smooth, muscular back and trails onto the white sheet. She is too perfect. The moment is too perfect. I am who I am and I can't help that. I cannot resist the temptation. I must capture this perfect moment and save it for all time. It's what I do.

I quietly move my easel into place. I no longer care about what is permitted and what is forbidden. I must do this thing. I fill my brush and I assault the naked canvas with passion and a fury I have never known before. I must do this and I must do it quickly. If she wakes before it's finished, it will

never be finished. She will never allow it.

I have no time to be pouring glasses, adding water and sugar. Those are moments that could be spent painting her. I drink my absinthe straight from the bottle. It is one more thing that she will be angry about if she wakes. I devote great effort to detailing every gentle, lush curve of her body. I take care to show the way the sunlight shines on her calf, the way the shadows wrap around her thigh, the way they dance and mingle on her ass. And her back, oh that back; it's so perfect in its symmetry and strength. I had never really noticed before, but it's her most attractive feature. I must take her from behind more often.

I finish the portrait and I am pleased, more pleased than I have been with anything I have ever painted. I am exhausted. I lie on the bed and snuggle up close to her. Her ass is soft and warm against my cock. I should be filled with desire, but I'm too weary and too drunk.

Much later — or maybe it's been only a few moments — I awake to the feel of a sharp blow to the side of my head. It's followed by several more. I am dizzy and my ears are ringing. I'm on my back and she is straddling my waist and pummeling me with her fists.

"How dare you?" she screams.

I grab her wrists and roll her onto her back. Now I'm straddling her and her arms are pinned to the bed.

"How can you not love it?" I ask. "It's a masterpiece. I have immortalized you."

"I didn't want to be immortal," she says. "I didn't even want to be mortal. How could you do this to me?"

I feel her arms go limp, but there is still fire in her absinthe green eyes. She's done fighting, but she is still very angry.

"Get off me, Vincent," she says.

I let her go. She stands up and gets dressed.

"I gave you everything," she says. "I turned you into the finest painter of your era. All I asked was that you never paint me. I was yours and yours alone. Why did you insist on sharing me with that world of fools? I am theirs now. I can never be yours again."

She drops a small blue purse on the bed. It's the same one she had that day at Henri's.

"I am buying your painting. You have finally been paid for your work. Does that make you feel like a real artist?" she asks.

She walks to the door and turns around to look at me one final time.

"Don't go," I plead. "Please don't leave me. I love you."

She laughs and shakes her head.

"How can you say that?" she asks. "You never even knew my name."

What can I say? She's right. It was a matter of much importance to me; it was an obsession, right up to the minute she became mine. After that, it somehow stopped being important. I didn't need to know who she was, I knew what she was. She was the Muse; it was name enough for me.

"What is your name?" I ask.

I very much want to know. Now that she's about to leave, the knowledge has become important to me again.

"I'm not going to tell you now," she replies. "You'd just put it on that painting. You've done enough damage already."

She puts her hands on my shoulder and kisses me. It's the sweetest kiss there will ever be, because I know it's the last we will ever share.

"I'm leaving now," she says. "And I won't be coming back. You may keep your painting, Vincent. It's all that you have left of me. It's all you will ever have of me."

\* \* \* \* \*

I slip into a deep depression. I waver between fits of rage and bouts of delirium. I'm making life hell for Paul and Sophie and I can't help it. There are moments when I'm convinced she is sitting beside me, stroking my cheek and kissing my brow. Self-delusion is the only sanctuary I have left.

Most moments I know that she has gone and I blame them for that. If they had taken the time to get to know her, if they had formed a friendship, then, perhaps, she might have stayed for the sake of that friendship. But they ignored her. They always ignored her. Now there's nothing to ignore. I know that's my fault, but I do blame them for it.

To make matters worse, Paul and I are having artistic disagreements. He thinks European art has become dull and lifeless. He is fascinated with works from Africa and Asia and he's obsessed with the human face and form. He insists that I should be painting portraits. He doesn't know that I have recently completed one. No one knows.

I couldn't bring myself to destroy it. There is too much of her in it, too much of me. I have carefully wrapped the painting and hidden it in the back of my closet. If no one ever sees it, then perhaps she may forgive me and return. I was always obsessed with painting her. Now that I have done so I am obsessed with getting her back. I think of nothing else.

I must pursue her but I have never been able to do that. I have always waited for her to come to me. Now that she has stopped coming, I don't know where to look for her. I don't know where she goes when she is not with me. I've never thought to ask.

I spend the night drinking absinthe like it was water. The empty bottles litter the table like so many faded memories. Green fairies spring from them and dance naked in front of me. They mock me. They all have her hair, her face, and her absinthe eyes. I can't continue to exist like this. I can't go on without her. I must show her that I love her above all else.

I take my straight razor from the dresser drawer. It has not been used in

more than a week. I haven't shaved. I haven't bathed. I haven't eaten. I haven't even painted. I stare at my pathetic reflection in the mirror and I know what I must do. Still, I can't watch myself do it and I know that I should not be standing when it is done. This will certainly cause me to pass out. I sit on the floor so I will not have so far to fall.

I take my ear between my thumb and forefinger and press the blade close against it. The blade is cold and sharp and hard. I have yet to break the skin and already it hurts. I pause a moment to collect my thoughts, focus my attention. There is no hesitation. My mind is determined to do this thing. I must be certain that I do it right. It has to be one quick stroke. If I pause part way through the pain will not allow me to finish. The task will never be complete. It will be an incomplete painting sewn to the side of my head for the world to see.

I take a deep breath and bring the blade down. I sever my ear in one clean, swift stroke. I cry out in agony and fall to the side. My head slams hard against the wooden floor. I see green fairies dancing in front of me. They are laughing and crying at the same time.

When I come to, Paul has taken the razor from my right hand. My left hand is still tightly clutching my severed ear. Sophie is wrapping a bandage around my head. She's giving me the poor Vincent look. I hate being 'poor Vincent', but it does seem to be my destiny.

Sophie looks at Paul. Her eyes are full of anger and concern.

"He's going to need laudanum for the pain," she says. "Go to town and get a couple of bottles."

I press my recently severed ear in his palm. I feel him recoil at the touch of it. Why? He would not find it repulsive if it were still attached to my head. What does he think has changed?

It's still my ear, but not for much longer.

"Take it to her," I say. "Tell her that she must come back to me. I still hear her calling me in the night. This is the ear I hear her with. If she wants the other,

she need only ask."

He nods, wraps my ear in his handkerchief and puts it in his pocket. He can't even look me in the eye. He doesn't know me anymore. I don't know me anymore.

She comes to me a few nights later after they have gone to bed. I am sitting alone in my room working on my fourth bottle. I hear the door open behind me and the room is sweet with the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg. My heart jumps into my throat. The blood pounds in my temples. I can feel it seeping into my bandage. I don't even turn around. I'm afraid of doing anything that might frighten her. I must wait for her to come to me. That's how it has always been with us.

She stands in front of the window and stares at me. She is wearing a gold chain around her neck and my ear is suspended from it. It's resting on top of her breasts. There were nights when I did that, when I rested my ear against her breast. I miss those nights so badly.

"Don't send me jewelry," she says. "It's lovely, but it doesn't change anything."

"You must come back to me," I plead. "I can't paint anymore."

She grabs my easel and drags it to my chair. She puts a mirror on the table and leans it against a couple of bottles. I'm embarrassed by how many there are.

"Paul was right," she says. "You should paint portraits."

She points to the mirror and I can see myself reflected in it.

"There's your next painting, Vincent. Paint the portrait of a fool."

Just like that, she's gone. I never see her walk to the door. I never hear her say goodbye. One moment she was standing there. The next there is only the smell of spice on the night air. It was the last time that I ever saw her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul says that it is my best painting ever. What does he know? He thinks that European art is dull and lifeless. What could be more so than a portrait of a dull and lifeless man, a portrait of a fool?

He's leaving soon. He's moving to Polynesia in search of inspiration. He has invited me to join him, but I know that it's a half-hearted invitation. He wants to get away from me and I can't blame him for that. I am mad and I grow madder with each passing day. It could have been so much worse. I could have gone after him, or Sophie, with that blade. I cannot be trusted to live in the world of the sane. When they have gone, I will have myself committed to the asylum at Saint Remy.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am forbidden to have absinthe while I am here, but I have been known to partake of forbidden fruit. The orderlies are paid a pittance for their long hours of labor. They will bring me anything I want, so long as I give them a decent gratuity. She never returns to me, but if I drink enough her memory does. It's sufficient to the needs of my art. I paint many portraits of the same fool.

The months slip away and the memories fade. I grow weary of this place. Nothing ever changes. She will never return and I will never recover. I'll never be the man I was and I was never that much of a man, not without her.

I check out of the asylum. The doctors are not pleased, but there is nothing they can do. I committed myself. They cannot hold me against my will. I return to my house in Arles. It's as empty as I am. I have made up my mind. I will drink myself to death, but even that doesn't work.

I have been drinking absinthe for too long. My body has grown accustomed to the poison. It will fog my mind and paint my world yellow, but it will not kill me.

I pour it down my throat. Finally, the familiar green fairy springs from the

bottom of one bottle. Why does she always hide at the bottom? I know that hair, that face, and those beautiful green eyes. I press the pistol to my chest and I pull the trigger. I will be lost in her absinthe eyes forever.

Part 3: *The Ice Maiden Cometh*

I never wanted to be a writer. It was the furthest thing from my mind. I have a calling. I was born to it. My family refines the finest absinthe in the world. They have for six generations and I would carry on the tradition for the seventh. It was destiny enough for me. It was all I ever intended to be.

I stand here beside the large wooden barrel, Vat 64, as solemn and discreet as a mortician. I watch as six of Paris' darkest and dreariest file past his grave. They lay flowers against the modest headstone. Lucinda puts her long, black shawl on the ground and kneels beside his grave. I know what she's going to say, it's a ritual for her.

"What an appetite, mon cherie," she whispers. "Did you think you could drink it all in one night?"

No, I never wanted to be a writer. The only writer I have ever known was Richard Chalmer. I barely knew him, but nothing about the man spoke well of the profession. He was a tortured and tormented soul. I was only a child back then, but I could see that; everyone could see that. The last time I saw Richard Chalmer I was thirteen years old and he was floating face down in Vat 64. No, I never wanted to be a writer. It just happened.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The vats hold a thousand gallons each and we open a fresh one every few weeks. The event was more like a ceremony—a family affair—and I was maturing. It was the first time I'd been asked to attend an opening.

Grandfather was unlocking the doors when she walked up. Everyone just froze. The sun was to her back and she was wearing a thin, green cotton dress;



every wondrous curve was silhouetted and highlighted. She presented an awe-inspiring image, most especially for a thirteen year old boy. She was beauty and she was legend; she was the muse.

Richard Chalmer stumbled into her life four years earlier. They met on a rainy night in one of the city's seedier nightclubs. She was sixteen – a hormonal cascade in progress, a heartache searching for a soul mate. He was in his fifties--an over-the-hill writer of hack fiction. His best days were behind him and his best days had never been all that good.

It was a match made in heaven. They moved in together. Over the next two and a half years he wrote five award-winning novels, international best sellers. And then one night he simply vanished. The press insisted he had disappeared under suspicious circumstances. How astute of them. Has a human being ever vanished under less-than-suspicious circumstances?

There was an intensive search, a rigorous investigation, but nothing came of them. After a few months the story slipped from the headlines and became one more file sent to the cold case squad.

His muse retreated to their villa and was not seen in public for the next year and a half. Not until that morning.

She walked straight up to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Are you opening Vat 64 today?" she asked.

I opened my mouth but the words refused to form. I was too awestruck to speak. I nodded. If we weren't planning to open it already, I would gladly have opened it for her.

She pressed her credit card into my hand.

"I want to buy it," she said. "Every last drop. Have it delivered as soon as it's bottled."

Grandfather unlocked the door and invited her in. As far as I know, no one outside of the family had ever been there for an opening; but she was legend, and it was her absinthe.

We moved the overhead crane into place and lifted the heavy wooden lid from the vat.

And there he was, the subject of much speculation, floating at the top of Vat 64. Old mysteries were solved that morning; new ones sprang up to take their place. The police no longer asked where Richard Chalmer had gone, but they were very curious as to how he had gotten there. The vat could not have sealed itself.

The investigators wanted to question her, but people don't always get what they want. They asked her to come down to the station and her lawyers arrived with a sworn deposition, which stated, in effect, that their guess was as good as hers. They presented her with a subpoena to testify before the Coroner's Inquest. She took a red marker, graded it C- and returned it. In her opinion it lacked originality. So did the second one; which she simply ignored. They threatened to have her arrested for contempt of court. Richard's fans, *her* fans, took to the streets by the thousands; they laid siege to the courthouse. The judge reconsidered the matter and decided that a sworn deposition would be sufficient.

But that day, we watched as the paramedics lifted him from the vat and lowered his body to the ground. It was likely that he had been in the vat since the night he disappeared. You wouldn't have known it to look at him. Apparently our absinthe preserves as well as it intoxicates. The expression on his face was that of a man who had died a moment ago.

She stared at him a minute and turned to face me. She was taller than me and larger. Her body was all that an adolescent boy might wish a woman's body to be, but her face was ageless. It would have been at home in my classroom. It would have been at home carved on the side of a mountain. She laid her forehead on my shoulder and she wept. She wept and she clung to me like the morning fog clings to the Seine. She wept and I held her.

I meant only to comfort; she was standing next to the body of her lover. She was in pain and she needed to be held. I wrapped my arms around her and

pulled her close. I meant only to comfort, but her breasts were soft on my chest. I could feel the warmth of her pussy against the front of my jeans. I meant only to comfort, but my dick had a mind of its own. It sprang to life and pressed hard against her thigh.

I meant only to comfort, but I needed comforting, too. I rose up on my toes and pulled down on her shoulders. There was a moment when I felt the cool, soft firmness of her thigh give way to the warm, spongy texture of her pubic hair. And in that moment I spilled my need into my underpants. My heart pounded in my throat, my ears rang and my knees went weak.

I thought I might fall, but her arms were close around me and she was stronger than she looked. She carried me through that moment, and I knew that she knew. I was embarrassed beyond measure.

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “I needed to be needed again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I’m twenty-three now. I’ve known a few women, some better than others. I’m not a player, but I am a slut. I’ve had dozens of lovers. I have never made love to a woman that I did not close my eyes and pretend it was her. In my heart, I have always been faithful to her.

That was ten years ago . . . ten years to the day. Every September 2<sup>nd</sup> the six of them gather here at Vat 64 to commemorate his passing. Grandfather allows it; it’s good for the brand-name.

Absinthe has always been one-part legend, and Richard Chalmer was the greatest legend of all.

They all claim they were his friends, but I have my doubts. He never struck me as the sort of man who had friends. He had her. That was enough.

The tall, bald man is the playwright. His name is T. Axel Dryve. He looks drawn and tight, too little skin stretched over too tall a frame. The T stands for

Trans. Only an American could invent such a boorish pseudonym. His plays make no sense to me. Scenery is sparse or non-existent. The dialogue is eloquent and flowery, but it has no substance. I could find more drama sitting quietly in a restaurant listening to the conversations at the adjacent tables.

The short, pudgy fellow with the ducktail haircut and the biker attire is B.F. Wellington – Wellie, to his friends, Whalie, to his critics. It's not a fat joke; he's not that big. It's a reference to his sculptures, which are extremely big. They are infinite variations on the theme of death: crushed bodies beneath piles of rubble, mangled bodies in crumpled cars, skewered bodies on wrought iron fences. He claims his works are supposed to inspire an emotional response from the observer. I suppose they do. They scare me. They are so big and lopsided that I am frightened they might fall and I will become part of his so-called art.

The skinny, morbid woman with short, black hair and pale white skin is Lucinda LeCray. In a city of painters, she is the most prolific, but not the most imaginative. Her paintings are all slight variations on *The Scream*. I can't imagine how she gets so much mileage out of twisted bodies and melting faces.

I'm sure that the other three men have names. I have never bothered to learn them. They are writers . . . and fools. All writers are fools. Even the one whose grave I stand beside.

Especially the one whose grave I stand beside.

I am expected to open the bottles and hold my silence. I am not an artist. They are the self-proclaimed masters of the Neo-Tragic school of art. I am not Bohemian enough to take part in their clever conversation. The absinthe flows freely and after a while the tongues begin to loosen.

Axel holds his glass above his head.

"To Richard Chalmer," he says. "The man sure could write."

"And drink," Wellie adds. "He drank like an Irishman."

Lucinda isn't going to be left out. She stands up on her chair and I am worried I might have to catch her.

"And fuck," she says. "Good Lord that man could fuck."

Axel helps her down.

"Tell me, Lucy, were you jealous that she wouldn't share him with you?" he asks.

She drains her glass and sets it on the table.

"I was jealous that *he* wouldn't share *her* with me," she replies. "I would have fucked her in a heartbeat."

I've no doubt that she would have. She has always been a woman of loose moral standards. The year I was seventeen I watched her down three bottles in two hours. She hiked up her skirt, lay down on the table and took on all five of them. I think she has never forgiven me for not taking my turn. Well, I'm not that big a slut. She does everything she can to make herself look like a walking corpse. Who wants to fuck a corpse? Except, perhaps, another corpse?

"Be careful," Wellie warns her. "She could come walking through the door at any moment."

They say that every year, but she never does. At least now we're starting to see a little honesty. They say they come here to pay their respects to Richard Chalmer, but it has never been about him. They come here every year in the hope she will show up to pay her respects.

They live for the moment when the Muse will smile on them and turn them into the artists they imagine themselves to be.

They are here for her. Well, so am I. I have no artistic aspirations, but I would give all that I have to see her smile at me one more time. That's why I always volunteer to babysit them . . . because one year she may come. So far, I have been as disappointed as them, but tonight I find myself feeling hopeful. This is the tenth anniversary. I think she will come tonight, or she will never come at all.

The door swings open and silence seizes the room. The Muse has finally arrived. She's wearing a long, flowing white gown and she has a white knit

shawl wrapped around her shoulders. The last time I saw her, her black hair was shoulder length. Now it runs to below her waist and it is woven into a long, loose braid.

She walks up to me, puts her hand on my shoulder and kisses me on the cheek. I'm a foot taller and sixty pounds heavier than I was the day we met. Other than the hair, she hasn't changed at all. She hasn't aged a day. She is seven years older than me. To look at us you would think it was the other way around.

"It's been a long time, Stephen," she whispers.

I nod. I'm not sure what to say. It has been a very long time, but it seems like it was a moment ago.

She is holding a bundle of white roses. She hands one to me.

"Be a darling and fix me a drink. I must pay my respects," she says.

She returns a few minutes later and sits beside me. The clique is sitting quietly and nursing their drinks. Their eyes are on us, but they dare not speak. They are trapped in the age-old ritual. They cannot approach the Muse, they must wait for her to come to them. Thus has it always been.

She finishes her drink and sets the glass in front of me.

"One more time," she says.

Her lower lip is quivering. She bites it gently as if to hold it in place. I pull my handkerchief from my pocket and give it to her.

"It's all right to cry," I tell her.

"Will you come if I do?" she asks.

I'm too embarrassed to answer. The truth is I probably would. It's the single most vivid and vibrant memory I have. It's my most treasured possession, and obsession.

"Nothing has changed," she whispers. "I still need to be needed."

It sounds so much like an invitation. I stare at her. Her lips are slightly parted and beckoning. Her clear green eyes will not leave mine. It's exactly the way she looked at me ten years ago. It brings to mind a question that has

haunted me all those years. I have never wanted anyone as badly as I wanted her. Would it have been that easy? What would have happened if I had looked straight into those absinthe eyes and told her how badly I needed her? What would happen if I did so now?

Well, file that under things that might have been. The last time I saw her she was standing next to Richard's body and I was dry-humping her. Such crudeness is tolerable from a boy. I'm a grown man now and I'll not defile the moment. She has come here to mourn her loss. I will be nothing less than a perfect gentleman.

I nod toward the main table.

"They need you," I reply.

She shakes her head and sighs.

"They need something," she says. "I suppose I should talk to them."

She walks to the other table. Axel puts one knee on top of the other. He's all bone and boner. Wellie is desperately trying not to stare at her tits. She has tucked my handkerchief between them and it does create a focal point. Lucinda does her best impression of a smile and tries to look as available and versatile as a woman could be.

"Lucinda LeCray?" she asks. "I remember when it was Lucy Cramer. You look like a cadaver, Lucy. If you want to be dead, why don't you climb into Vat 65? We'll fish you out in the morning and bury you next to him."

Just fucking great: now I'll have to watch Lucinda like a hawk. She's fool enough to do it, and Grandfather would have a fit. One dead artist floating in a vat of absinthe is a legend. Two would be a scandal.

It happens in a split second. They appear like daggers in their hands — sketches and canvases, scripts and manuscripts. Who will be the fortunate child? Who will she smile upon? Who will she bless with inspiration?

She holds her hand up like a cop directing traffic at a busy intersection.

"Stop," she says. "Stop trying to make me into something I'm not. I wasn't

his muse, I was his mistress. He wrote his novels. I sucked his cock. One had nothing to do with the other."

They are crest-fallen. The rug has been jerked from beneath their feet. They are a ship without a rudder.

She takes a full bottle from the table. She wraps her mouth around the cork. I'm definitely going to save that mental picture. It'll come in handy the next time I'm inside another woman's mouth. She spits the cork onto the floor. Neither she nor the bottle will have any further use for it. It has served its purpose.

She puts the bottle to her lips and pours. It's one long, lavish, lingering gulp and I am swallowed alive. In my head, it's me she is putting to her lips. It's me she is swallowing. It's my seed that spills from the corner of her mouth, trails down her neck and races toward her breasts.

Would that I were a drop of absinthe clinging to her nipple.

She drains the last few drops from the bottle and returns it to the table.

"You want inspiration?" she asks. "There it is; one green fairy per bottle, but drink quickly or she will escape."

They are dismissed and they know it. They get up and file quietly out of the building. That's a relief. I usually wind up carrying them to their limos.

She pulls her car keys from her pocket.

"I'm going home," she says.

Far be it from me to disagree with anything she might say, but there is a time to stand up, to be a man. She has just chugged a bottle of our family's finest product. I'm amazed she's still standing. I take the keys from her hand and I see the double-M on the key ring. It's a Maybach. His novels still sell; she can afford the best.

"I'm going home," she says. "If you don't want me to drive; I suppose you'll have to."

There is no room for doubt. That is definitely an invitation, and I am



definitely accepting it.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a portrait of Richard hanging on the wall of the foyer. There's an end table beneath it with a vase full of fresh cut flowers. On either side of the portrait are large candles in ornate brass sconces. They are lit and I suspect they are always lit. There is a black trench coat and a long, striped, multi-colored scarf hanging on a wooden coat tree in the corner. They're his; I've seen him wear them. No wonder she has never come to his grave, this place has the feel of a shrine.

"You must have loved him very much," I say.

She sighs and her cinnamon-sweet breath drifts across my neck. It gives me goose bumps, and a hard-on.

"I loved them all," she replies.

That is not what I wanted to hear. I'm a very jealous fantasy lover. It's difficult for me to think about her being with him. I don't want to think about the notion that there were others.

Even more distressing, she was only sixteen when she met Richard, and I get the feeling she hasn't been with anyone since. How many others could there possibly have been?

I sit on a sofa in the living room and wait while she mixes our drinks. I've spent the evening playing host; it's nice to be the guest. She returns, carrying a large pitcher of chilled absinthe in one hand and two glasses in the other. She has changed clothes, and now she's wearing a short, thin cotton dress. It is the same pale green color as her eyes. I could swear it's the same one she was wearing the day I met her. She sits down, close beside me. We're not quite touching, but if either of us were to move a knee more than an inch we would be. She fills the

glasses and hands one to me.

She drinks hers in one long gulp. It's not the way I usually drink absinthe. My family goes to a great deal of trouble to produce absinthe that's smooth and sweet, a pleasure to drink.

However, excess does seem to be the order of the night. I finish mine just as quickly. She's already pouring herself another. I set my empty glass next to hers.

She smiles and fills my glass, and hands it back to me. The second round disappears as quickly as the first. This time I pour the absinthe into the glasses.

"Don't try to keep up with me," she says. "You wouldn't be the first artist to drown in this stuff."

I'm not an artist, but it doesn't seem to be a good time to mention that fact. There are two paintings hanging above the unlit fireplace. I recognize the work immediately. They're Van Gogh's—one from the Sunflower series and one from the Starry Night series. I'm not really into art, but I do enjoy the Impressionists; Renoir, Monet and especially Van Gogh. He was the original absinthe legend.

"You like Van Gogh?" I ask.

"I loved him," she replies. "For a while."

Suddenly I am alone. Her body is still close, so close, but her mind, her spirit, her absinthe eyes . . . they are lost in a starry night over the moonlit Rhone. I don't mind. I am content to sit here and look at her. She is a work of art in her own right. She's as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa, as ageless as the Venus de Milo.

The top buttons of her dress are undone, the view is spectacular. I watch as her breasts rise and fall with her breathing. It's a magnificent tide of flesh ebbing and flowing. Before I realize it, she's back and I am caught red-handed. She reaches down the top of her dress and pulls a joint out of her tiny bra. I'm sure it has been there the whole time. Somehow, I never noticed.

"Were you looking for this?" she asks.

I wasn't, but I'm damned glad to see it. She lights it up, takes a long hit

and hands it to me. I really need one right now; there is something so hot about a beautiful young woman smoking. I lean back and she rests her arm on the back of the sofa. Her fingertips are so close to my shoulder, but they are not touching me. It's not an embrace; it's a rumor of an embrace, and it's driving me crazy. How is it possible to be this wasted and this nervous at the same time?

"Sorry about that," she says. "It's so easy for me to get lost in his paintings."

I can totally appreciate that; the man was a master. I raise my glass toward the paintings.

"To Vincent Van Gogh," I say. "He's no Lucinda LeCray."

She chuckles and snorts, and plumes of blue-gray smoke pour from her nostrils.

"I always loved Lucy," she says.

That comes as a bit of a surprise to me.

"But I hate her paintings," she adds.

That is in no way surprising.

"It's just the opposite with Vincent," she says.

I'm not sure exactly what she meant by that, but she has consumed a liter and a half of absinthe in the past two hours. I have to consider the possibility she has no idea what she meant. She hands the joint back to me and I take another hit. I'm in a fog. I'm stoned from scalp to sole. The world is bathed in a pale yellow glow and everything has an aura . . . especially her. I give the joint back to her.

"This is some really good weed," I say. "I don't think I've ever been this wasted."

She bursts into laughter.

"It's not the weed," she replies.

Well, then it must be her, because it damn sure ain't the absinthe. My family has been making it for two centuries. It has always been good, but never

*that* good. Not even in the legendary 'good old days.'

She stands.

"I have another of his paintings," she says. "It's in my bedroom."

I'm not that wasted. I'm still aware of my surroundings, and my situation.

"Said the spider to the fly," I reply.

She laughs.

"We don't need a bed for that," she says. "The sofa will do, or the floor."

She holds her hand out to me.

"Come on," she says. "I really do have another of his paintings, and it's one of his best.

I stand. I am helpless, putty in her hands. I need to be whatever it is she needs me to be. She's right. Hanging on the wall of her bedroom is Van Gogh's *Nude Reclining*.

It's one of his best. I have never appreciated his work quite so much. I am seeing the world through a pale yellow filter. It makes the painting seem three-dimensional and very life-like.

"That's an excellent reproduction," I tell her.

"It's an original," she replies. "They're all originals. Richard bought them for me."

His picture is in a silver frame on her dresser. She tips her glass toward it.

"Posthumously," she adds.

She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her head on my shoulder.

I have always wondered – everyone has always wondered, but I swore I would never ask. I think most of Paris has come to a similar moral accommodation. I can no longer keep my promise. This is moving too fast. For the first time in my short sexual career, I'm not in charge. I don't mind that, but I do have to know the truth of the person who is in charge.

"Did you put the lid on Vat 64?" I ask.

She holds me closer, presses her body hard against mine.

"Yes, I did," she replies.

I have always suspected as much; I think everyone has. I don't think that I was expecting to get an honest answer to the question, or that I really wanted one. Too late to turn back; now I have to know.

"Was he still alive?" I ask.

She kisses me on the neck. Her lips are wet and warm, but there's not a part of me that doesn't shiver. I need her to hold me closer and keep me warm. I want her so badly that I have already forgotten the question. Why couldn't she see that and forget as well?

"Yes, he was," she whispers.

It's the hardest thing I have ever done, but I push away, gently, but firmly enough to show my resolve.

"It's late. I should be getting back to the city. Would you call a cab for me?" I ask.

She takes my hand and we walk back to the living room. She pours us each another glass and I drink mine quickly. I'm not trying to keep up with her. I want to get out of there as fast as possible. She motions for me to sit, but I don't even though I really want to. My world is spinning around, but I don't want her to think I will stay. I never fancied myself to be Richard II and I begin to sense that's precisely what she wishes me to be.

She relights the joint and takes a long hit. The ember has an aura and it swells into a large, orange sphere. The muse is kissing the sun . . . or is it the other way around? She hands the joint to me.

"I gave him everything he ever wanted," she says. "When he wanted death more than me, I gave him that too. He was insane and he was in pain. It wasn't murder, it was a mercy killing."

I take a hit on the joint and put it in the ashtray. We're not going that route either. I believe her, but I'm still leaving.

"I should be going home," I tell her.

She steps in front of me, puts her hands on my shoulder and kisses me softly on the lips.

"I am the only home you will ever need," she whispers. "Come inside me. I will keep you safe and warm."

She slides her leg between mine and my cock is pressed hard against her thigh. It's been there before. She pushes hard on my shoulders and I lose my balance. There's a polar bear rug on the floor in front of the fireplace and we are falling toward it. Well, we're not exactly falling—it's more like a controlled descent. I can't believe how strong she is. She can still carry my weight. My shoulders meet the white fur rug as gently as if I had lain down.

Her ass is soft and warm against my crotch. Her hips move in a circle and she presses herself hard against me. I close my eyes and surrender to the sensation. I really want to be inside of her, but there's no hurry. She's enjoying herself and I want her to; I owe her a good dry-hump.

I can feel the urgency in her body. She's ready to come. I open my eyes. I have to see the look on her face. I'm certain she saw the look on mine. It's not fair. Our bodies are all but joined, but I have already lost her. Her eyes are locked on those damned paintings. I used to be jealous of a man who died ten years ago. Now I'm jealous of a man who died one hundred and twenty years ago. I will not share the moment with him. It's ours and ours alone. I must bring her back to me.

I grab her breasts and squeeze hard. I slide my thumbs across her nipples. She trembles and returns to me, looks at me and smiles. She closes her eyes and her lips open. Her knees are clenched tightly against my sides. I'm sure my ribs will break at any second and I don't care.

Her body goes limp. Now my arms are supporting her weight and it's the easiest, most natural thing I have ever done.

She opens her eyes and smiles at me, puts her hands on top of mine. I'm still holding her breasts, firmly.

"You're not going to be rough, are you?" she asks.

I loosen my grip. How can she ask that? It's her ass pinning my hips to the floor. It is she who is having her way with me. But I look in her eyes and I can see the truth of it.

Someone has been. So much so that she is still frightened. She can still remember the pain. I want to reassure her. She must know that I would never hurt her. She must feel safe.

"You can be on top the whole time," I say. "Nothing will happen unless you want it to."

"I like that," she says. "But let's take it back to the bedroom."

We stand up and she turns her back to me. I don't need to be asked; I know what I am expected to do. I carefully undo the buttons of her dress. She pours us each another glass of absinthe, and clinks her glass against mine.

"Bottom's up," she says.

How many glasses have I had tonight? Too many. Does she want me to drown in it? It's a stupid question. A dangerous question. She lights up the joint, takes a hit and puts it between my lips. I take a good toke and she returns it to her lips. She glances toward the table.

"I've got the joint," she says. "You get the pitcher."

I bend over to grab it and there is a moment when I think I might fall onto the table . . . or float above it.

"This is really good weed," I say.

She's already walking toward the bedroom. She laughs.

"It's not the weed," she says.

She lets her shoulders go limp and the dress just falls away. It slides down her body and she steps out of it like she was walking through a pale green puddle. Acrid, blue-gray smoke drifts across my face. A few seconds later it's followed by a tiny white bra.

I want to check out her ass, but my eyes can't seem to get there; they are

entranced by her back. Her shoulder blades are swept and scalloped; her spine is a perfectly straight, elegant curve. Her back is smooth, but muscular, so muscular. No wonder she could carry my weight; she could carry the weight of ages. She is a caryatid who refuses to fall. Why did I promise her she could be on top? I would so love to take her from behind.

She walks to the painting on the bedroom wall. There's an accent light above it and she turns it off. She motions for me to lie down on the bed and I am only too glad to comply.

"I find his paintings a bit distracting," she says.

I nod. I'd noticed that.

She glances back at the picture one more time.

"What's your favorite Van Gogh painting?" she asks.

That's a no-brainer.

"Starry Night," I reply.

She laughs and sits down on the bed.

"Everyone says that," she says.

She unbuttons my shirt and smothers me with kisses . . . first my chest and then my stomach.

"There's a very interesting story behind that painting," she says. "I'll have to tell you about it one of these days."

She undoes my trousers. I lift my hips and let her pull them to my knees. She raises her leg and uses her foot to slide them down my calves and off my feet.

Suddenly I am inside her mouth and it's a wondrous place to be. So wet, so warm, so compelling. It only takes a few minutes for her to bring me to the brink. She wraps her hand around the base of my cock, squeezes tight and lets it slip from her mouth. She patiently waits for the tide to subside then returns to love's labors.

It's exquisite the first half-dozen times. After an hour, it becomes



excruciatingly so. I can't take it anymore. I grab her by the back of her neck and try to force her back down, but I can't. She's too strong.

"For God's sake, let me come," I plead.

"Say my name," she demands. "No one ever says my name. Say it and you can come in my mouth."

She's right. I have never said her name aloud. I have never heard anyone say it, but I do know it.

"You are Dahlia," I say.

"I am Dahlia," she whispers.

She lowers her head and returns to her task. It only takes her a few seconds to coax me to climax. I grab her neck and pull her down on my cock. I have always found that to be a satisfying act . . . even more so now, because I know I couldn't do it if she didn't want me to.

\* \* \* \* \*

I awake, alone and lonely, in her bed—their bed. There's a robe laid out for me. I don't know where my clothes are, so I put it on and try not to think about who wore it last.

I find her out on the patio. She's wearing a short, white silk robe. She looks so beautiful in white; it strikes such a contrast with her jet black hair. Her absinthe eyes are a hint of spring green bursting through winter's snowy mantle.

"It's about time you got up," she says.

"I don't feel comfortable wearing this robe," I tell her.

She erupts in laughter; she knows me too well. She can read me like a comic strip and she finds me every bit as entertaining.

"It's not Richard's robe," she says. "I bought it for you."

I look at my digital watch; it's the only piece of my previous evening's attire I'm still wearing. It's barely eleven o'clock. From the disheveled state of her

hair, I'd guess she hasn't been up much longer than I have.

"When?" I ask.

She smiles and stares into my eyes.

"Ten years ago," she replies. "I knew you'd grow into it and I knew you'd be coming here."

I'm astounded. She has loved me as long as I have loved her; it's very flattering, and a little frightening. She killed the last man she loved. Granted, he probably wanted her to. It's likely he crawled into Vat 64 and waited for her to end his pain. But it still feels wrong. That she could do it . . . could lower the lid into place and seal him into the sweet, wet dark. I could never do such a thing and I think that puts me at a distinct disadvantage in this relationship.

It doesn't matter; that battle was lost the moment she walked through those doors last night. It was lost the morning I held her in my arms and came in my pants. I can't help but mourn the lost time. I grew into that robe years ago.

"Why did you wait so long?" I ask.

She tilts her head and arches her eyebrows; her eyes are swimming in sorrow.

"Why did you?" she asks.

An excellent question, and an excellent question deserves an excellent answer, but I haven't got one.

There is a sumptuous brunch laid out on the patio table— diced cantaloupe and strawberries, club sandwiches and potato salad, and, of course, the obligatory pitcher of absinthe. I have seen her without her clothes, but I have yet to see her without her absinthe. The potatoes are still warm and soft, just like her. I finish the salad quickly and she puts another scoop on my plate.

"Eat up," she says. "You're going to need it."

My glass of absinthe is half-empty, or is it hall-full? Either way, she fills it to the top.

"You're going to need that, too."

No doubt. She hasn't touched her food, but she certainly looks hungry. I am in seventh heaven. Everything is perfect except for my clothing, or lack thereof. I'm a modest man. At the moment I feel like a prisoner of modesty. There is nowhere that I wish to go, but I need to pretend that I could go there if I wanted to.

"Where are my clothes?" I ask

She laughs. "They're in the drier. Don't worry. You won't need them any time soon."

I can see it in her absinthe eyes. I was right; she hasn't been with another man since Richard. Hers is not a need that springs from weeks or months of fasting. Hers is a desire that is born of the ages. Am I man enough to fill it? It's an excellent question, and this time I have an excellent answer. She will make me be man enough.

Her eyes are filled with desire, but I can see another emotion hidden just beneath the surface. She's frightened. For Dahlia, every time is the first time; it's an integral part of her charm. It brings to mind something she said last night. I don't like talking about him, but I need to.

"Did Richard hurt you?" I ask.

"No, I was the aggressor in that relationship, too," she says.

What a delightful way to remind me of my respective position in the sexual hierarchy.

"David was rough," she says. "David was very rough."

Apparently he was; there are no masterpieces hanging in the patio, but I can see her drifting away. She is lost in the memory, and I am morbidly fascinated with a need to know the details. She senses my need and it's in her nature to fill it.

"He was just rough in general, but he was into unannounced sodomy," she says. "I don't mind the sodomy part, but a girl likes a little warning, a little preparation. He wanted it to hurt and it did . . . every single time."

I am lower than whale shit on the bottom of the ocean. I should be feeling sympathy for the pain she suffered; all I can feel is my cock swelling. My desire is great, but it doesn't overwhelm my curiosity. She's the strongest human being I've ever known. I can't imagine her allowing any man to treat her like that.

"Why?" I ask.

"In his defense, he honestly believed I needed him to be like that and I suppose I did," she says. "The rough sex made him a better writer, and I needed him to be a better writer."

"Better than what?" I ask.

It's a rhetorical question. Why can't she see that? She kisses her glass and pours the absinthe down her throat.

"Better than he turned out to be," she says.

I'm beginning to see a pattern. David was a writer. Richard was a writer. Richard killed himself, with a bit of help.

We are so special, Dahlia and I; we are in love. It's the first time for me, but not for her.

I'm not the first, or the second, and I suspect I'm not even the third. There have been others. I don't want an exact number, or even a ballpark figure. I don't want to know their names. Two names are two too many to deal with.

"Were they all writers?" I ask.

She sighs and nods.

"Except for the first," she says. "He was a painter."

I'm learning how to read her. I can see it in the darkening of her eyes, the clenching of her jaw, and the tensing of the muscles in her arms. She hates him. He hurt her; even worse than David. I feel as if I have failed Dahlia. I'm supposed to keep her safe, even from the memories, but how can I if I don't know what they are?

"What did he do to you?" I ask.

Milky-green tears float in her absinthe eyes; they cloud my vision.

"He made me immortal," she says. "I'll never forgive him for that."

It should sound absurd, but it doesn't. She hasn't aged a day in ten years; I think I could know her for a thousand and she never would. She is immortal, but Richard wasn't. Neither am I.

"What happened to David?" I ask.

She sighs.

"He shot himself in the head," she replies.

Oh, I can definitely see a pattern here.

"Am I going to kill myself?" I ask.

She reaches across the table and strokes my cheek.

"No, you're going to be what I need you to be. I'm certain of it," she says.

"If you could not be what I needed you to be, you would go mad; and you would die at your hand or mine. I'm sorry, Stephen. It's just the way things are."

I can't complain. I have been warned and I refuse to heed the warning. Fools rush in where wise men fear to tread.

No, I never wanted to be a writer. It was the furthest thing from my mind. But it's what she needs me to be, and I dare not be less than she needs me to be.

We finish our lunch; she pours us each a fresh glass of absinthe, and puts a single ice cube in each glass. She has touched them, and her touch will make it that much sweeter.

"Bottoms up," she says. "Ice cube, too."

She runs her tongue across her upper lip.

"Let's try swapping cubes," she adds.

It's a delightful exercise in passion, but it does not go smoothly. The ice bangs against our teeth, the cubes spin around inside our open mouths, slide across our tangled tongues.

I'm not sure whose cube is in whose mouth, but I'm certain it doesn't matter. She's no better at this than I am, and I'm very pleased about that. It's going to be a ritual for us, and her lack of skill at it thrills me. It's one more thing

that I didn't inherit from Richard. It's our ritual.

My heads is floating, my world is spinning, and she is so much wiser than me.

"You're right," I say. "It's not the weed. Is it you or the absinthe?"

She kisses me gently on the ear.

"Yes," she whispers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some time later, I realize she's right about another thing. I don't really have any need for clothing. I never go anywhere. I drink absinthe, smoke pot and make love to her. When my cock can no longer stand, I sit on the sofa, drink absinthe, smoke pot and stare at his paintings.

They have changed since the first time I saw them. Frankly, I have never understood why the wealthy are so fascinated with paying small fortunes to possess original works of art. I have always thought they should be in museums, to be shared with the world. I still do, but now I understand the fascination. He touched those canvases; he poured his heart and soul onto them.

He's been gone for generations, but they're still here, right here, in front of my eyes. He left the world a more beautiful place than he found it. How many men can say that?

She stands in front of the unlit fireplace and stares at the paintings. She's lost in thought and so am I. She has her obsession and I have mine, though mine is certainly a more recent development.

She feels my gaze caressing her ass. She senses my desire poking and prodding, wondering what it would be like and demanding to know, insisting that the question be answered, that the matter be laid to waste.

She spins around quickly. Her hair flies up and lands across her forehead, hiding her right eye from my view. It makes her look that much more

mysterious, alluring and desirable. *You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Dahlia, but you're beautiful coming and going. Right now I need you to turn around. Lose yourself in his paintings and let me lose myself in my twisted obsession.*

"You can't stop thinking about it, can you?" she asks.

It's written in the frown on her face, the sad, condescending look in her left eye. She's disappointed. She expected more of me, but she shouldn't have. Life is full of disappointments.

She's so ageless, so wise. How could she not have known that?

I'm tempted to pretend I don't know what she's talking about, to feign ignorance, innocence, but it would be pointless. She knows me better than I know myself, and that's okay. But she also knows me better than I know her, and that's not okay.

"No, I can't," I finally admit.

It feels like an admission of guilt, and I have no doubt that it sounds like one. She wants me to feel guilty, so I do. I dare not disappoint her. But my guilt is quick to surrender to the aching, yearning, throbbing of my cock. I have nothing to feel guilty about. She would never have mentioned it if she didn't want me to think about it.

"If you want to fuck me in the ass, just so say," she says.

"I want to fuck you in the ass," I reply, instinctively.

She sighs, quite deliberately and shakes her head.

"You're a pig."

I nod. I'm not, as a rule, but I do have my moments, and I'm not going to feel guilty about that, either. I'm a man. As a gender, we do have our porcine proclivities.

"If that's what you want," she says.

Who is she trying to kid? It's what she wants. I don't know why. I doubt if she knows why. I stand behind her, untie the sash and her robe falls to the floor. It's soft and cool on my feet. She is soft and cool on my mouth.

I kiss and lick at her neck. She shivers and her goose bumps tickle my lips. They cling to my tongue like Velcro. We are one thing.

"I'll be gentle," I promise.

"No you won't," she replies.

*Damn it, Dahlia. You presume too much. You believe you can turn me into the writer that Richard was, but you're wrong. You think you can turn me into the monster that David was, but that's never going to happen. I will be gentle, gentler than you could ever imagine.*

I put my hands on her shoulders. "Kneel."

From my standpoint it isn't a command or a request, merely an acknowledgment of what's going to happen next. But nothing is ever that simple with Dahlia. I press down on her shoulders—not hard enough to force her to the floor, just hard enough to let her pretend she is being forced.

She kneels, knees slightly spread, her head hung low. She is ever so submissive, so much the innocent by-stander. She has memorized her role, but I have given mine a great deal of thought as well.

I push her hair over her shoulder. I want her back laid bare. I begin at the base of her neck and delicately kiss and lick each vertebra. I slide my fingers over her breasts and across her stomach.

My touch is so light that it barely qualifies as a touch. It's a rumor of a caress, hovering on a not-too-distant horizon.

By the time I reach the small of her back my fingers are dancing up and down her thighs. She can't even see the paintings, she is lost in the moment and the moment will last forever.

My right hand finds her pussy. My finger slides up and down the slit. It's a delightful, tactile dichotomy. Her pussy is soft and smooth on my fingertip. Her pubic hairs are coarse and rough.

I cover her ass with dozens of kisses, each more passionate than the last. I purse my lips and send a stream of air racing down her crack, and watch her skin



roll like ripples across a pond. I have always been hers; now she is mine. She is a leaf, lush and green. I am the gentle breeze that makes it quiver and come alive.

I run my tongue across the small dimple at the base of her spine and move down her ass, burying my face deeper as I go. I was a little concerned about the taste, but I needn't be. There's not a single part of her that doesn't taste as sweet as absinthe.

My finger spins around her swollen clit, rubs back and forth across it and slides in and out of her pussy. It's almost more than she can handle. It's ecstasy in two-part harmony. My tongue is matching my finger . . . touch for touch, stroke for stroke, penetration for penetration. She's trapped between my tongue and finger.

She's getting close and I want her to be very close before we proceed to the main event. I need to give her a good head start, because I've been on the edge since the word sodomy spilled from between her thick, red lips.

I pull my face away and slide my cock between her ass cheeks. There's not the slightest suggestion of resistance. She's never been readier. I slip inside her; slowly and not too deep. I promised to be gentle, and I am, for the first few strokes. After that I can't afford to be. She's too close. I must bring her back.

I grab the back of her neck and shove her face to the floor. I need to get the best possible angle, and she accommodates me by arching her back to raise her ass even higher. I slam into her, deep and hard, over and over until the pain brings her back to me.

She is mine. I have her right where I want, perched on the precipice. I can keep her there for as long as I choose.

"Look at me," I plead.

She twists her shoulders and looks back. I stare deep into her clear, green eyes and watch her cycle through the sensations; short, gentle strokes that drive her to the edge, hard, deep ones that bring her back.

She could go on forever, but I can't. I was nearly finished before we ever

started. I slow my pace and bring her to the edge once again. This time I don't pull her back. I wait for her body to quake and convulse with relief so long awaited.

I slide deeper and deeper until I am all the way inside her. There's no need for me to move.

She's quivering like a road sign in a wind storm. It only takes a few moments for her orgasm to give birth to mine.

We are spent; there's nothing left. Kneeling requires too much effort. We collapse to the floor and I slip out of her. She rolls onto her side and lays her head on my chest.

"Oh my God, Stephen," she whispers. "Oh my God."

It's a pleasant, placid aftermath to our passion. I enjoy holding her like this, but I do notice she hasn't looked me in the eyes since we finished. Is she too embarrassed, or does she think that I will be? I'm not, you know. Not even a little.

She brings my hand to her face and showers it with kisses.

"You have magical fingers," she tells me.

I feel her body go limp and she seems to fall asleep with my fingers pressed against her lips. But I don't think she ever sleeps . . . not really. I think she pretends to so that I will. Right now, I think she's pretending to because she doesn't want to kiss me. I don't really blame her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grandfather arrives on the fourth day. It's a little past two when he rings the doorbell, and we're still in our robes when we answer the door.

"Good morning," he says. "I didn't mean to wake you."

There's not a trace of sarcasm in his voice; he's very good at hiding his emotions. She smiles and invites him in, which is good, because I might not have.

I love him, but he doesn't belong here.

This is my world. *She* is my world.

He's angry. If I'm not doing my job someone else is. He's right; it's not fair to the rest of the family, but there's nothing I can do about that. I don't exist in the same world anymore, but I don't have the heart to tell him that; and I don't know how. But she does.

She takes him by the hand, leads him out to the patio and slides the door behind her.

How rude. How curious. I can't hear them, but I can read them. He's still angry, but it's a waste of time. It's a mouse roaring at a lion. He's afraid of her and I'm dumbfounded. I've known him my entire life. I've never seen him be afraid of anyone . . . except, perhaps, Grandmother, God rest her soul.

Dahlia isn't doing anything to be intimidating, and she can be when she chooses to. She's meeker and more submissive with him than she has ever been with me, and still he's afraid of her. I study them and ponder the conundrum. I nod and smile with sudden understanding. She's got something on him. She knows something he doesn't want anyone to know. I'm curious and getting more so by the minute.

They come back inside and he's had a change of heart. He tells me that he's glad I've found someone; I'm sure he means it. He pats me on the back and tells me to write a novel that will make the family proud. Oh, please. What nonsense has she been telling him? I'm not going to write a novel. Not for the family, not even for her. I've made my mind up. In the back of that mind I hear a faceless voice whisper, "*You keep telling yourself that.*"

There's a pitcher of absinthe on the table; there always is. I offer him a glass, but he holds his hands up in front of him and takes two steps back. I never ceased to be amazed. He's so scared of her that it looks like he's afraid of the absinthe. He can't wait to get out of here and I don't try to stop him. He doesn't belong here. No one belongs here. It's our place.

She fires up a joint and hands it to me. I'm so glad she waited until he was gone. He wouldn't get it.

"Your grandfather is a very charming man," she says.

"Yes he is," I agree. "What have you got on him?"

"Don't be silly," she says. "I told him that it would be good for business. You and me, an item; the press will get wind of it and the family name will be in the news."

I'm sure it's true, but there's no truth quite as deceptive as a half-truth. She's so coy, so innocent, so unsuspecting . . . but I know better.

"What do you know that I don't?" I ask.

She laughs, kisses me on the forehead and strokes my cheek.

"Sweetheart, we could fill libraries with the things I know and you don't," she replies.

I sigh and shrug, take another hit on the joint and chase it with a glass of absinthe. What can I say? When she's right, she's right.

She keeps good on her promise to Grandfather. We do the nightclub circuit on the weekends. We go to the occasional opera or theatre opening. I'm in the news more than I care to be. I'm a very private person. I don't like that sort of exposure, but she insists on it. She's determined that the people love me as much as they love her, and I can't understand why.

"I don't like people," I tell her.

"I know," she replies. "But you need them. The people will protect you when I can't."

That makes no sense, but I no longer expect things to make sense; they haven't for quite some time. I just go along with the program. We are constantly in the news. Pictures of us adorn the covers of dozens of gossip mags. They always refer to me as 'local writer'; apparently they don't employ fact checkers.

Dahlia insists we attend the Film Festival in Cannes, so we head there, planning a two-week stay. You wouldn't believe how short the drive is. It turns

out that a Maybach really *will* go 250 kph if you have the balls to drive that fast, and she does.

There's an exhibition of impressionist painters at the local museum and, of course, we're not going to miss that. Lucinda is already there and she's obviously enthralled. I'm surprised.

How could anyone who paints so poorly have such excellent tastes in art? Life never ceases to amaze me, and I'm in for one more surprise. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* is the centerpiece of the exhibition.

I put my hand on Dahlia's shoulder and my lips next to her ear.

"You said there was a story behind this painting and you would tell me some day," I say.

She laughs.

"I already have. You enjoyed it very much," she replies.

Suddenly, I'm losing her again. Of course I'm losing her; she's standing in front of one of his paintings, and he's a tough act to follow. But I will not be denied; I will not be forgotten. I'm a modest man, not prone to public displays of affection, but I'm willing to bend the rules in moments of crisis.

I kiss her on the neck, blow gently into her ear and tickle the lobe with the tip of my tongue. She is quite the woman; she oozes absinthe from every orifice. It's what makes oral sex with her so fulfilling.

I don't eat Dahlia, I drink from her. She is a bottomless well and I have a never-ending thirst. I lick her ear like a kitten lapping at a saucer of milk. She shivers and wraps her arm around my waist. She's with me in body and mind, but her spirit is still lost in a *Starry Night*. I suppose that it always will be.

"If you're a good writer you might be able to buy it for me," she says.

I try to do the math, but it's beyond me. I would have to be a very good writer. She does love collecting his paintings. Richard was good for three. How many am I good for? If my best efforts could only buy one of his paintings, this would be the one.

In that moment, I know that I'm lost forever. I belong to her. I haven't written a word, but I'm thinking of myself as a writer. I never wanted to be a writer. It was the furthest thing from my mind.

I'm looking forward to a quiet evening of tenderness and sodomy, but it will have to wait.

Axel is in town for the festival. Someone has actually made a short film based on one of his plays. Dahlia insists we attend the screening. He is an old friend of hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that day, Lucinda and Axel sit next to us in the darkened theater. I hate them. I will always hate them. They remind me that Dahlia was once with Richard. I don't want to be reminded. I don't need to be reminded.

We sit through the film with a couple hundred other unfortunate souls. They look at each other, nod and pretend to understand. What a crock of shit; there's nothing to understand. The screen fades to black, the lights come on and Axel stands. His not so humble offering is well received; nearly everyone is applauding. He should be riding an emotional high, but he's not; I can see it in his eyes. He's heartbroken because she isn't applauding and she is the only one he was trying to impress.

They join us for drinks at the café. After three rounds he works up the courage to ask what she thought about the film. She's too kind to be honest; too honest to be kind.

"Ask Stephen," she says.

What a delightful opportunity. I'm glad we put the sodomy on hold; this will be almost as much as fun. I've wanted to give him a piece of my mind for the past decade. Leave it to Dahlia; she intuitively fills my every need. I refuse to be gentle, but I will endeavor to be civil.

"You don't connect with the audience," I tell him. "You need to grab their attention in the first scene and never let go. Don't just dump the story in their laps. Take their hands and lead them through it."

I expect him to be angry, but he's not. He's in shock. He looks like he's seen a ghost.

Dahlia is smiling at me; I've never seen her happier. I can feel Lucinda's eyes all over me. They cling to me like a spider-web. She is staring at me the way Dahlia stares at Vincent's paintings, and I don't like it.

"What?" I ask.

Lucinda shakes her head. I guess she's clearing the spider-webs.

"I'm sorry," she says. "You sound so much like Richard."

I've read his books and she's right, I do. I swallow hard and breathe deep. Dahlia takes my hand and squeezes gently. The victor congratulating the vanquished. I am so fucked.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's nice to be home again, and it *is* my home, at long last. His trench coat and scarf no longer adorn the coat tree. There are no fresh-cut flowers in the foyer. The candles are no longer lit, but his portrait still hangs on the wall. I stand there and stare at it. The king is dead. Long live the king. The question is, for how long?

I think I know how she felt when she was with David. I'm frightened; I'm always frightened. I can't pretend any longer. I'm becoming what she needs me to be. I still don't know her story, but I will learn it, I will write it, and it will hurt, every single time.

She takes my hand and leads me into the living room . . . different paintings to contemplate, I suppose.

It's nearly noon and neither of us has had a single glass of absinthe. How

did that happen? I empty mine before she fills hers. I'm getting good at this. I set my empty glass on the table.

"One more time," I say.

I take the time to savor the second glass. There's no need to rush; I'm already wasted, I'm already floating. What is it about her and this drink? I take another sip and have an epiphany. I'm certain I have uncovered one of her secrets.

"Is Grandfather selling you pre-ban absinthe?" I ask.

"No, she replies. "It's just a very special vintage."

Apparently it was an epiphany in error, but that's a bit of a relief.

"I still have a few cases of the pre-ban stuff, but I bought it from your grandfather's grandfather," she says.

I smile. She's the most honest person I've ever met. I don't believe a word of it.

"Would you like me to fetch a bottle of it?" she asks.

I hold my hand up in front of me. I think I'll pass on that. No offense to my illustrious ancestors, but that shit was poison . . . death by degrees.

She pushes my feet apart and kneels between them, unhooks my belt and pulls the zipper down. I can feel her breath on my cock. What a delightful prospect; what a clever distraction.

I put my fingers under her chin and raise her face until I'm looking her in the eyes.

"We don't make special vintages," I say.

She sighs and pulls my zipper up. How clumsy of me. I've ruined the moment. I've blown the opportunity before the opportunity could blow me.

"You just won't let it go, will you?" she asks.

I won't, I can't; I don't know how to.

She raps her knuckles on the hardwood floor.

"There's another eight hundred gallons in the cellar," she says. "It's a very



special vintage. It's the last batch from Vat 64."

*Oh my God.* He sold it to her anyway. No wonder Grandfather is afraid of her. If the authorities found out, they'd lock him up and throw away the key. Her revelation is profoundly disturbing on more levels than I can calculate. I really need a drink.

What the hell am I thinking? Richard's body soaked in that vat for eighteen months. I'm not drinking this. I'm repulsed to think that I have been for so long. I hurl the glass into the fireplace. Absinthe burns quite beautifully. It's a fiery rainbow. I swear I can see green fairies dancing in the flames. They're not happy to be there.

She slaps me hard across the face but I'm too numb to feel the pain.

"That was a waste of perfectly good absinthe and very expensive crystal," she says. "Don't do it again."

It's the only trace of violence our relationship has ever known, and we're both a little turned on by that. She brings another glass from the cabinet, sets it on the table and fills it.

"I've been drinking it for years," she says. "You've been drinking it for six months. If it was going to kill you, it would probably have done so by now."

She's right. She's always right, but she's not always kind. What a considerate way to conduct the experiment. A boy likes a little warning, a little preparation. I would have done it anyway. She denies me nothing. How can I do less? Still, she felt the need to sneak it in. Her secrets and surprises are simply a display of power. I wasn't being gentle the night I told her she could be on top. I was acknowledging the true nature of our relationship. She's Dahlia. She's always on top. Even when I take her from behind and my cock is in her ass. Especially when I take her from behind and my cock is in her ass.

There are presents waiting for me in the bedroom, and not the sort I usually find there.

She has given me a beautiful mahogany desk and a plush, brown suede

recliner. There's a box of pens and two reams of paper on the desk – not one, but two. No vat of absinthe for me; mine will be the death of a thousand cuts. I'm tired of fighting, but not so tired that I will sit in that chair, no matter how nicely she asks.

But I quickly find out I could be wrong about that. She takes a pillow from the bed, drops it on the floor and kneels on it. She looks up at me and smiles.

"Hi sailor, want a blow job?" she asks.

What a ridiculous question. Who doesn't want a blow job? But I look at that chair and it's a very foreboding piece of furniture. It's a throne that I have no wish to ascend to, but I will.

I lower my pants and sit in the chair . . . the things we do for the women we love, the things they do for us. Oh my, the things they do for us, and she does them so well.

Once again, it's taking forever and that's not her; it's me. My eyes must be open. I have to watch her doing it; that's half the pleasure, half the beauty. But I can't focus. The pens and paper hover in the background just above and behind her head. They're an unpleasant reminder.

I made a commitment when I sat in this chair, and I don't know how I'm going to keep it. I still don't know her well enough. If I try to write her story I will fail. She was fairly specific about the penalty for failure. I've seen the results floating at the top of Vat 64.

She knows me too well. She senses my every need and rushes to fill them. She stops what she's doing and sits in my lap. Her arms are strong around my neck; her hair is soft against my chest.

"You're not going to die," she whispers. "This time I got it right. I caught you while you were young enough."

Well, there's no denying that. She had me at thirteen. *She had me at hello.* She's very good at everything she does. I do feel reassured. Somehow, we will get through this together. I will be what she needs me to be. With a nod, I give in.

She returns to the floor and to her task. I'm putty in her hands. I'm granite in her mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, we strike a compromise that at least one of us will be able to live with. I don't have to write anything, I don't even have to pick up a pen. I just have to sit in this chair for at least one hour every day. She insists that the story will come to me if I sit there long enough. My greatest strength, my only shelter, is her absolute faith in me. She is my home. I come inside her and I am safe and warm.

I point at the sparse contents of the desk.

"Pen and paper?" I ask. "It is the twenty-first century."

She nods.

"Richard wrote with a keyboard," she replies. "So did David, and . . . well . . ."

Her eyes are glassy and distant and I worry she may drift away as she so often does.

"You will not find my story with a keyboard," she says. "There were no keyboards when it began."

She lies down on the bed and I contemplate the task before me. There's a mirror mounted on the wall above the bed. I can see her reflected in it. I frown and hope she can see. She's not making this easy. I'm supposed to write her story, but she won't tell me what it is.

I have to figure it out. Women. Why do they always expect us to figure these things out for ourselves? We're not that smart, you know.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first night is a little rough. I don't have to do anything, which is a relief, but it makes an hour last forever. I'm constantly looking at my watch and I feel like an adolescent in detention.

I am determined to do this thing for her. It's the only thing she's ever asked of me. But the weeks turn into months, and some nights I sit there for two or three hours; some nights I sit there until sunrise.

But not tonight. I can see her reflected in the mirror. She rolls onto her back and her legs are spread wide apart. It's an invitation that I don't know how to refuse.

I'm ever so quiet. I must not disturb her. She's sound asleep and I know how I want her to wake. She's very perceptive. I'm sure she'll return the favor some night. I bend over the bed and kiss her knee then work my way up her thigh, kissing and licking as I go. I'm close now . . . so close. I can smell her. I breathe deep and I can taste her. She's cinnamon and nutmeg dancing on my tongue. She's licorice on my lips.

She's awake now. I feel her hands on top of my head. I want her to be wild with desire. I want her to grab my head and shove my face into her pussy. Instead, she strokes my hair.

"Not writing tonight?" she asks.

I stop and stand. How clumsy. She has ruined the moment. She has blown the opportunity.

Why does she always ask that question? She knows the answer. I'm angry, but it's me I'm angry with. I'm no better than Richard or David; I just found a different way to fail her. I don't write the wrong story. I don't write anything. I don't know what I'm doing wrong, but I know this isn't working. I have to try something else, anything else.

"Did you say you had a few cases of the pre-ban stuff?" I ask.

She laughs. She laughs at a lot of the things I say. I should be annoyed, but instead her laughter comforts me.

"I was being modest," she replies. "I have a few hundred."

She returns a few minutes later carrying a case. I can see the difference right away. Our product is packed in thick cardboard cases. This is a wood slat crate with straw for padding.

She sets it on the floor.

"You're going to need this," she says and hands me a screwdriver.

I set about removing the first screw. It's a monumental task. It's been in there a very long time. It does not come out easily, but it does come out eventually. It's a hard-won trophy.

I give it to my mistress.

"That was one hell of a screw," I say, and she smiles.

"A girl can never hear that enough times."

I take a deep breath. My labors are far from finished. There are two screws per slat and I will have to remove two slats to get a bottle out.

She takes the screwdriver out of my hand.

"You're not a mechanical person, are you?" she asks.

I shake my head. I'm not.

She jams the screwdriver under the slat and pries it loose. The second slat yields just as quickly. She tears them off the crate and hands them to me.

"Throw them in the fireplace," she says. "I'll mix you a drink."

I'm halfway down the hall. I can barely hear her, but I *can* hear her.

"Try not to cut yourself."

I cringe and sigh. I do love you, Dahlia, I do want you, I think, but it's going to be a very boring night if you insist on de-balling me.

By the time I return she has filled a glass for me, but hers is empty. I look at it. She knows I don't like to drink alone, or with anyone except her. She fills her glass, but from the pitcher, not the fresh bottle. She's not going to drink the pre-ban absinthe. I'm very thirsty, but I hesitate. I need to know. She senses my every need and rushes to fill it.

"I can't drink original absinthe," she says. "It would be . . . ."

Circle the day in red. She's not stalling or being secretive. She can't think of a word that will finish the sentence. Dahlia is stumped and that almost never happens. But only for a moment; she has found the perfect word. I can see it in her absinthe eyes. She can't just leave me hanging. I have to know.

"It would be what?" I ask.

"Incestuous," she replies. "It would be incestuous."

I've received some weird responses from her, but that tops the pile. I need a drink. I finish it and set the empty glass on the end table.

"You're a very strange woman," I tell her.

She smiles and nods and refills my glass.

"It's what I do," she replies.

She does it very well. She never lies, but she never tells the truth. It would be frustrating if I weren't wasted, but I'm not nearly wasted enough. I empty the second glass in one quick gulp.

She laughs. She laughs a lot, she finds me amusing. And at the moment *I* find everything amusing; most especially her amusement. It's contagious.

"Take it easy," she says. "It's not what you're used to drinking."

She's right, she's always right. I sit down on the bed. Vertical is no longer a possibility. Horizontal is an imminent probability. Sitting is difficult. I've lost my sense of balance, but the world has never been clearer. It's as if I had been seeing everything through foggy glasses and they were suddenly wiped clean.

The floor ripples and rolls like the ocean, I can feel the carpet washing over my feet. The walls can't stand straight. They ebb and flow, wobble and weave, pulse and throb. I'm seeing the world through a yellow filter. I'm seeing it through the eyes of a madman and it has never been more beautiful. The painting on the wall springs to life. Feminine Nude is more than three-dimensional, it's alive. It's as if there were two beautiful women in the room with me . . . and there are, but they are both Dahlia. I'm sure that will make sense

some day, but not today.

"You still with me?" the voice asks.

I'm not sure if it's her or the painting. I play it safe and bet on her. I'm drifting too far from the shore. I need a landmark, something to help me catch my bearings. I set my sights on Dahlia. I have always set my sights on Dahlia.

"I think I am," I reply. "Who painted the world yellow?"

Her eyes dim just a little and a single milky-green tear rolls down her cheek.

"Vincent painted the world yellow," she replies. "Everything was yellow to Vincent, but he was more than a fool. He was a portrait of a fool."

She fills my glass and hands it back to me. Has she no sense of decency? She is an accessory to the crime, but I'm a willing victim. I put it to my lips and return it to her empty.

"You really shouldn't chug that stuff," she says.

Five seconds later, I'm flat on my back and she's straddling my chest. I'm so far gone that stoned would seem safe.

"Do you have a joint in your bra?" I ask.

She unties her belt and her robe falls open.

"I'm not wearing a bra," she replies. "Or panties. And we just finished smoking a joint."

Did we? I don't remember. I can't smell it and the ashtray seems to be empty.

"Really?" I ask.

"No, not really," she says. "I'm just fucking with your head."

That's cool. I don't mind.

She slides forward on my chest. She grabs my hair and guides my face into her crotch.

Suddenly it's truer than ever; she really is fucking with my head. That's cool. I don't mind that, either . . . not at first.

She hovers just over my mouth, just beyond my reach. I stick my tongue out, desperate to taste her. But for some reason my tongue can't seem to find her, which is unusual. It's usually drawn there like a pin to a magnet, like a swallow to Capistrano.

I'm very wasted. So I can't tell whether it's a matter of distance or if my aim is that bad. There's a thick, yellow fog hovering over my face. I can feel her. I can smell her. I can even taste her essence in the air, but I can't see her.

I take a deep breath and exhale hard. The fog spins in marbled, whirlpool eddies. I didn't know there were that many subtle variations of yellow. The fog parts and I see the curly, black hairs swaying. I watch as she lowers herself onto my anxious, waiting tongue.

She grabs the headboard and slides her pussy back and forth across my face, from chin to nose . . . gently at first, then harder and harder, until my head is forced down and the pillow wraps around my cheeks and ears.

It's too much. I grab her hips and shove her back. I open my mouth wide and wiggle my jaw back and forth, trying to work the kinks out.

"Am I too heavy?" she asks.

There's no way I'm stepping on *that* landmine. I would never tell a woman she weighs too much, especially not a beautiful, naked woman who's sitting on my chest.

"Your hairs were tickling my nose," I reply. "I didn't want to sneeze in your pussy."

It's not a complete lie. They were, and I suppose it's possible that I might have.

She smiles, tilts her head and closes her eyes. I can still see the gears spinning. She's taking a moment to draw a mental picture, giving me a moment to do the same. It's a slightly ludicrous image I've drawn and she bursts into laughter.

"Would you like me to shave?" she asks.



It's one more mental picture quickly drawn. Actually, I would like her to shave her pussy, but not right now. I only stopped to catch my breath. I don't want to lose the moment.

"Okay," she says. "I will be bald, and light. I will be light as a feather."

She takes my bottle of absinthe from the end table and holds it over my face. "Open wide."

Why not? How many times have I said that to her? And she always does.

Everything is happening in slow motion. I watch the absinthe cascade from the lip of the bottle and fall toward my parted lips. I can count each and every drop, but I'm very drunk and I keep losing count . . . not that it matters.

I lose track of everything. My world is spinning and gyrating. I think I would float away if she weren't sitting on my chest, holding me place. She is my anchor in stormy seas. She is a safe harbor, my *only* harbor.

She drains the last few drops into my waiting mouth and lays the empty bottle on the bed.

She slides forward, raises up and lowers herself onto my face. She is my queen; I am her throne.

But something doesn't feel quite right. I can feel the change rubbing against my lips and sliding across my tongue. I can't imagine when it happened. Did I drift off long enough for her to shave? I don't remember, but I suppose it's possible.

I lift her up; just enough to get a better view, just enough to confirm what I already know.

She's more than shaven; she's as smooth as polished marbled. I've seen a few shaved pussies at close range. You can always see the tiny, dark dots where the hair used to be. Not this time. It's as if her pussy had never known a single hair.

I have never been hungrier, thirstier. I spread her lips and lick like my life depends on it and perhaps it does. Absinthe pours from her in a pale, green

stream. It slides across my tongue and down my throat. It spills down her thighs and up her belly. It seeps across her like ink spreading across an unblemished blotter.

She glows green and thin, butterfly wings sprout from her back. They flutter across my hand and tickle my knuckles. She fades, becoming transparent. I can see through her. I can see into her and she is hollow, empty. I cannot allow her to remain that way.

I shove my tongue into her as far as it will go. She clamps her muscles tight around it, tugs and pulls and draws it inside of her.

*Dear God, Dahlia, if I go any deeper my tongue will come out of your mouth.*

I grab her hips and pull her down.

*Descend on me, my love. Swallow me. I want to crawl inside your womb and be born again.*

She arches her back and clamps her thighs tight against my cheeks. Her wings flutter furiously.

I can hear the curtains rustling, the windows rattling. She tilts her head back and opens her mouth.

There's nothing remotely dignified about a green fairy coming. It can be measured on the Richter scale. It redlines the decibel meter. She howls like a banshee and they can probably hear her all the way to Paris.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I wake my head is lying in her lap. I seem to recall leaving it there. I rub the sleep from my eyes and smile at her. Last night is a little fuzzy. I'm not certain just how it played out.

"Did I, uh, finish what I started?" I ask.

"Yes, you did." She sighs and her breath drifts cinnamon-sweet across my face.

Well, that's a relief, but I was pretty wasted. So the question lingers.

"Was I any good?"

It's a matter of great importance to me. Dahlia is the most sexual being I have ever encountered. I have often worried that David and Richard's greatest failure was not artistic short-comings; that it had more to do with their inability to feed her gargantuan sexual appetite. It's not a mistake I would care to repeat.

She holds her hand and waggles it back and forth. What an astounding accolade. What a raucous review. I was so-so.

She let's me stew in it for a few seconds then bursts into laughter.

"You were wonderful," she replies. "You made it all the way to the chewy center."

She smiles and gives me that familiar, loving, but slightly condescending look. She's concerned, like a mother worried about a small child who's acting abnormally.

"What's the last thing you remember about last night?" she asks.

I give the matter a bit of thought. It requires effort. It seems like a very long time ago.

"I remember you pouring a bottle of absinthe into my mouth," I reply.

"After that everything is blank."

I'm not surprised. That pre-ban shit is wicked. It's a miracle I'm still alive, but miracles have been occurring with increasing frequency.

"Did I miss anything interesting?" I ask.

"Yes you did. But it's okay. You'll remember when you're ready to."

I suppose I will. I would have presumed I was ready now, but apparently not. Dahlia always knows best.

She stands and puts on her robe.

"I'm famished," she says. "What about you?"

I follow her to the kitchen. I will eat, because she's eating, but I'm not really hungry. Why would I be? I just ate.

We sit on the sofa and share a joint. She always has a joint in her bra, even when she's not wearing a bra; and she obviously isn't wearing a bra right now. I have seen her breasts a thousand times, and still I can't take my eyes off them . . . so soft and smooth, so cool and creamy. They're not big; they're a perfect example of less being more.

I stare out the wide glass patio doors. The colorful autumn leaves carpeting the courtyard are sugar-coated. The night blessed us with a light dusting of snow; the morning sun has yet to melt it.

There's a pitcher of absinthe on the table. The modern stuff. I only drink the original at night. I only turn to it in those moments when I suffer delusions of becoming a writer. And they *are* delusions. I've sat in that brown recliner for so many nights that it has molded itself to the contours of my ass, such as they are.

I still haven't written a word. I still don't know what to write. That's more frustrating than ever, because I'm certain there was a moment when I did. Somewhere, lost in the thick yellow fog, there was an epiphany . . . a split-second when everything made sense. I don't know when it happened, but it did happen; I can remember it like it was a billion years ago. I don't know what I was doing when it happened, but I know I wasn't sitting in that chair.

If I had been I would have captured the moment on paper and the task would be behind me.

Will the moment ever happen again?

She knows everything; she even knows what I'm thinking. She takes a bottle of the original from under the coffee table.

"It might," she says. "You'll need this."

Ah yes, the pre-ban stuff; it's become a ritual and we do love our rituals. I drink a few glass of 'the good stuff', we make love and I head for the brown recliner. I devote myself to the arduous task of non-writing. I'm very good at it. I manage to not write better than anyone ever has. I could win the Nobel Prize.

I glance at my watch. It's only ten-thirty.

"A little early for that, ain't it?" I ask.

"Never too early to get drunk and make love," she replies.

When she's right, she's right . . . but that's not what I meant. I was up until four, busy not-writing. I'm not ready to return to the task. She fills my glass and flips her hand, pinky finger up. It's the signal. We no longer say 'bottoms up'; it's implied, it's a given.

She fills my glass again and hands it back to me. I empty it and hand it back to her.

"I was talking about the chair," I say.

She closes her eyes and tilts her head back. It's another subtle way of telling me to drink up, and I do. It's my third glass and three is always the magic number, the mating number. Not that I need three glasses to get an erection. I can do that just thinking about her. Three glasses is the point where I can no longer tell whether or not I have an erection, but she can.

She smiles and I can see it in her absinthe eyes . . . we are bedroom bound. She stands and I do my best impression of a man standing. It's not very convincing.

"Are you going to be okay, or should I carry you?" she asks.

I don't bother to hide my laughter. Carry me? She's been carrying me since the day we met. That's never going to change.

"I'll be okay," I reply.

She walks down the hall and out of her dress. I love it when she does that. My shirt and trousers don't come off so easily, but they do come off, eventually. I'm naked when I join her in the bedroom. The pillows are piled up at the headboard and she's reclining against them. Her knees are pulled up in front of her, her thighs are pressed together and her back is to me. So, sodomy is the order of the day.

The absinthe has bathed my world in a yellow fog. The sunlight pours through the window and strikes the painting. It springs to life. It's been doing

that a lot lately. There are two beautiful women in my bedroom, but only one in my life.

I slide in beside Dahlia and kiss her on the neck. She arches her back and presses her ass hard against my cock: bottoms up. I am deep inside her and I am more than lost. I have ventured beyond the pale. Reality is fracturing around me. My gaze keeps shifting from Dahlia to the painting and to the bottle of absinthe; back and forth until back is forth and they are all one thing.

It's epiphany revisited. I finally get it. They are one thing. Dahlia is the painting. Dahlia is the absinthe. Dahlia's the green fairy. Vincent painted her and made her real. He made her eternal. Eternally sixteen, eternally a virgin. He was her first. He was the painter.

We finish. I finish. I hold her close, closer than ever. She's a fairy. She could slip through my arms at any moment. She's weeping, but they're tears of joy. She knows that I know. She understands that I finally understand.

"You posed for Vincent?" I ask.

Now she's angry. Have I gotten it wrong? She's tense. Every muscle in her body tightens. I'm still inside her and she's crushing me. It feels so good. Cling tight, Dahlia. Don't let go. I dare not slide from you. I must subside within you.

"I didn't pose for him," she says. "I forbid him to paint me and he did it anyway."

"So you punished him by driving him mad?" I ask.

She laughs. Her laughter ripples through my cock. It tickles.

"I certainly didn't help matters, but that man was mad long before I met him," she replies. "I'm the daughter of absinthe and insanity. I was a figment of his imagination, but I made him a great artist."

She sighs and I can feel that on my cock, too.

"He had to paint me," she says. "He had to make me real, but he was too mad to function in the real world. The poor damned fool; he loved me and he sent me to the one place where he couldn't follow. I can only be myself when I'm

with a madman.”

It’s a disquieting thought. She’s with *me* now. She has made me a writer, because she needs me to be one. She has driven me insane, because she needs to be with a madman.

She knows me too well. She senses my every mood, my every thought.

“Don’t blame me,” she says. “You faux-fucked me while we were standing four feet away from Richard’s corpse. You spent a decade obsessed with me, but you never called, you never knocked on my door. Your sanity was always in question.”

I suppose it was. I just hadn’t noticed until she became a part of my life . . . until she became my life.

We sleep for a couple of hours and then I get up and go to the brown recliner. My dedication is admirable. I stay there at my desk all afternoon, all night and well into the next morning. A marathon session . . . I should have been very productive, but I wasn’t. There are dozens of crumpled sheets in and around the trash basket, but only four finished pages sitting on the desk. I glance at my watch. It’s nearly six, so four will have to do.

I crawl into bed, pull her close and fall asleep. I don’t wake until noon and she’s still sleeping in my arms. That’s unusual. Dahlia is an early riser, and most days I wake up alone. This is so much better. I lay there and hold her. I could do it forever. I have been doing it forever.

She stirs in my arms, kisses me and sits up in bed.

“Definitely writing last night, I see.”

I nod. Yes, I was. I’m feeling very proud about that.

She stands up and walks toward the desk. “Did you play basketball when you were in school?”

Actually I did, but I wasn’t very good at it and that’s obvious in my many missed shots.

She kneels and begins picking up the crumpled sheets of paper. “Did you

write anything that didn't get thrown at the trash can?"

"Four pages," I reply.

Her back is to me, but I can see her smile.

"You can read them if you want," I say.

"Why would I do that?" she asks. "I already know how the story ends."

Not what I wanted to hear, but it's a valid point.

She stands and stares deep into my eyes for the longest time. She's concerned.

"Do you?" she asks.

I nod. I think I do, but I could be mistaken. I frequently am.

My eyes are drawn to the painting, they frequently are. I get out of bed and give it a closer examination. Something's wrong with it.

"I think it's fading," I say. "The colors aren't as bright and beautiful as they should be."

She laughs. She always laughs. "You're not drunk on absinthe. Nothing is as bright and beautiful as it should be."

"You are," I assure her.

I have made her smile, but it required an effort on her part. She would never let it show, but Dahlia's not feeling well today. She's not quite her usual self and I do so love her usual self.

\* \* \* \* \*

I continue writing and the story goes quickly at first, and then slows as my worst fears are confirmed. The painting is fading and Dahlia is ill. She won't let me do anything about either problem. She insists it's all in my imagination. Well, imagination has become a very relative term.

I know I'm not imagining the specks of bare canvas I can see between the brushstrokes. Vincent was thorough; he never left a bit of canvas uncovered. The



painting *is* fading, and I insist we bring in a restorer. The painting must be preserved for posterity. But Dahlia won't listen. Vincent painted it; no one else dare put brush to it.

As for Dahlia, she insists she's all right; she's just feeling the winter doldrums. But it's more than that. For weeks she spends sixteen hours a day in bed; now it's been more like twenty. It's affecting every aspect of our lives . . . even our sex lives.

Lately, it's all oral sex with us. We laugh and say we're French and that's natural for us, but the truth is I'm afraid it's the only kind of sex she's physically capable of. I don't want to lose her, but I am; and I know that's my fault. She's dying a little with every page and I can't stop writing. When did writing become so important? I know it was always important to her, but I don't understand why. It's killing her. She was Richard's accomplice in death. Am I expected to be hers? I spent so long fearing I would die at her hand . . . and now she is dying at mine.

I can only hope there is justice in the afterlife because there's none in this life. I do the only thing I can; I can't stop but I can slow down. In December I wrote two sentences per night, but that proved to be much too taxing, too progressive. In January I wrote two words per night, but even that pace will finish the story far too soon.

Today is the first of February. I think I will give February a single drop of ink per night. I will dispense them like the tears of a lesser god. I will make this thing last forever. I will make *her* last forever.

It's an excellent plan with one minor flaw. She's not going to let me get away with it. She walks up to my chair and she's carrying three bottles of absinthe in each hand. How is that even possible? She sets them on the desk.

"I don't care how many bottles it takes," she says. "Finish it tonight. Be done with it."

I'll do no such thing. I won't finish it tonight or any night. I won't finish

her.

She senses my every mood.

"You're not going to lose me," she says. "The story is the only thing standing between us. Finish it and we can be together forever."

And I believe her. I always believe her; even when she's lying. *Especially* when she's lying. Four bottles and six hours later and the story is complete. I always had the where-with-all; I only lacked the will.

I'm so glad to have it behind us. I can't wait to tell her, but I will have to. I look in the mirror and I see my world for what it is. The bed is empty, the canvas is blank and I am alone.

What have I done? I'm the biggest fool of all. I had two beautiful masterpieces in my bedroom; both Van Gogh originals. I destroyed them both. I crushed them beneath my pen.

What was I thinking?

But there's no turning back now. I put the ink on the paper one drop at a time, but I can't reclaim it the same way. What's done is done.

\* \* \* \* \*

The police are curious. Dahlia has disappeared. She has vanished under mysterious circumstances. I was her sole companion. I am the sole heir to a small fortune. They have seen the pattern before. I am described as a person of interest and that description doesn't sit well with the public.

The detectives call and request that I come in for questioning and I politely, but firmly, decline. They insist, and I tell them to go fuck themselves. It would appear that I do have a bit of backbone. It must be leftover from Dahlia. I'm not being arrogant for arrogance's sake. I have a good reason for not answering their questions. I'm not a very good liar and the truth is so preposterous that it would make me look guilty.

Twenty minutes later four detectives show up at my front gate, but they never make it past the squadron of lawyers camped out in the courtyard. They never will. I will go to any lengths to avoid answering their questions. I'm innocent. I have a right to defend myself.

The protest began at ten the next morning – several hundred Bohemian-types carrying signs in front of the police station. By noon the students joined the parade and the numbers swelled into the thousands. Axel and Lucy were right at the head of it. I have no doubt they organized the whole event. They turned out to be more than the measure of what I presumed them to be. I will have to pile praise on their next works. I owe them. If their art was half as altruistic as they are it wouldn't need my praise.

Grandfather stops by once a week. He cooks for me and tries to clean up after me. He feels guilty and he should. He knew I was drinking from Vat 64 and he never told me. He still hasn't told me. I love the man but, in the end, he proved to be much less than the measure of what I presumed him to be.

Yet I enjoy his visits. I need the occasional reminder that there is a world beyond the walls of this villa. At least I think there is; I have no intention of investigating the matter myself.

The weeks go by and I slip into a thick, yellow depression. Grandfather wants to hire a nurse, but I won't let him. I can take care of myself. I can feed myself. I do, when I'm too weak to open another bottle. I can clean up the house, and myself, but I don't. There's no one to clean up for, so why bother? It's time that could be spent drinking, and usually is.

I spend a lot of time in that brown recliner. We have grown accustomed to one another.

I don't write or pretend to write; I don't even not-write. The chair is turned away from the desk.

The pens are daggers at my back, but I'm not afraid of them. They have done all the damage they could possibly do.

My eyes, my thoughts, they are always on the empty bed or the blank canvas. There are moments when I swear I see her lying there. There are moments when I remember exactly what 'Feminine Nude' looked like.

This is not one of those moments. This is one of those moments when I drink absinthe straight from the bottle and wish I could remember. This is a moment when I stare at the empty bed and wish Dahlia was lying there.

Oh Dahlia, sweet Dahlia. She never lied, but she never told me the truth. She told me that if I failed I would go mad and kill myself. She never warned me that the same fate awaited me should I succeed.

For I am quite mad; there's no denying it. I will die by my own hand. I already have, I'm just taking my time. I have made the decision and that's a bigger part of the act. Mine will be the death of a thousand bottles. It's a well-traveled road, and my predecessors have left milestones to guide my way.

If a thousand bottles isn't enough, then I'll drink ten thousand. I'm sure Grandfather can get all the pre-ban stuff I want, and he will. I know his secret. He will give me what I need and hope the secret dies with me.

But I'm hopeless; I can't even drink myself to death. Some days it's twenty or thirty bottles and still there's no end in sight.

I can't be without her any longer. I tear through her dresser drawers. I must find something of hers. I must touch it, hold it, and sniff it. I find no delicate ladies undergarments.

I'm not surprised; she seldom wore them. I do find a silver-plated .32 revolver with ivory handles.

There is no such thing as coincidence. Everything happens for a reason. I would not have found the gun if I were not intended to use it. I open the chamber and examine the contents.

There is one spent cartridge and five live rounds. Life is bright and beautiful. Five is four more than I will need.

I sit here with a bottle of absinthe in one hand and a pistol in the other. It's

my sixth bottle. Sometimes I get confused. I put the pistol to my lips instead of the bottle. I must be careful about that. Nothing could be more pitiful than an accidental suicide, especially when I have so carefully orchestrated an intentional one.

There are moments when I can see her lying in our bed. There are moments when I can remember the painting to the last brushstrokes. Those are perfect moments. I will wait for a perfect moment. I will put the barrel to my head, and I will pull the trigger. If I ever served a useful purpose, I fulfilled it when I finished her story.

The moment hits me around bottle nine. She just steps out of the bare canvas and back into my life.

"I see you've quit shaving," she says.

She walks over to me, leans forward to embrace me. She stops, pulls back and waves her hand in front of her face.

"And bathing," she adds. "For heaven's sakes, Stephen. How can you live like this?"

To be precise, I wasn't trying to live like that; I was trying to die like that. As to the personal hygiene, that's strictly mind over matter. I didn't mind, so it didn't matter. But now it does. I don't want her to see me like this and she already has.

She senses my every need and rushes to fill them.

"Let's get you cleaned up," she says. "Then I'm going to fuck your brains out."

It shouldn't be too difficult a task. My brains are shaken, stirred and soaked in absinthe . . . and I never had that many to begin with.

I sit in the tub and she fills it with warm, clear water. It's gray in a matter of minutes. It *has* been a while since I acquainted my body with soap. She drains the water and refills the tub. This time there may be a chance of restoring me to fuck-able condition.

She looks at me and sighs. "What is it with men and beards? They're not attractive. We don't love you for your beards; we love you in spite of them."

I wasn't growing a beard, I just hadn't gotten around to shaving. I reach for my straight razor, but she slaps my hand away.

"I'll do that," she says. "You're drunk. You'll wind up cutting an ear off. Men have done that, you know. Vincent did."

I'm losing her. She's drifting off. I don't really mind. She's so beautiful when her absinthe eyes are a thousand miles away. But she is holding a straight razor a few inches from my face. I would prefer her undivided attention.

"Vincent did what?" I ask.

"He cut his ear off and gave it to me. I already had two. It seemed quite sufficient. Why would he do that? What a ridiculous thing to do."

Quite ridiculous, but I get Vincent. I am Vincent. I'm certain it made sense at the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grandfather stops by the next day. He's delightful that both I and my house are clean and orderly. He knows he won't have to take care of me anymore. I have remembered how to take care of myself. Dahlia has reminded me.

She's sitting on the sofa wearing a tiny silk robe and a great big smile. Her knees are a mile apart. Grandfather pretends not to look, but I know he is. She knows he is. She wants him to or she wouldn't be doing it.

I offer him a glass of absinthe; I always do and he always declines. It's fun because I know why he won't drink it. Even the offer makes him squeamish. I find it amusing. We're on our third pitcher of the morning; I find most things amusing. He congratulates me on my return to a semblance of normality and takes his leave.

"That was positively indecent," I say. "He's in his seventies. You could have given him a heart attack."

I've never seen her change moods so quickly. At first she laughs, she finds me amusing.

I can't blame that on the absinthe; she always has. But her amusement fades in a split-second.

Suddenly her absinthe eyes are filled with sorrow, and pity . . . and milky-green tears.

She wraps her arms around me and lays her head on my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers. "I thought you knew. He can't see me, Stephen. You're the only one who can see me. That doesn't mean I'm not real."

Well, technically, it does; but I'm not going to get bogged down with technicalities. *Real* is relevant, and relatively unimportant. What's real? What's not? She is cinnamon and nutmeg dancing on my tongue; she is licorice on my lips. It's all the reality I require.

"It's so much better this way," I reply. "It's perfect."

She gently pushes away from me.

"Not quite," she says. "But it will be. I'll be right back."

She returns a minute later and she's carrying two reams of paper and a box of pens. She throws them into the fireplace.

"Now it's perfect," she says. "We have to be careful. You're very creative. You might write a story about me, and then we'd both be in trouble."

I laugh. I find her amusing. I'm not going to write about anything, not even her. Where would she get such a ridiculous notion?

I never wanted to be a writer. It was the furthest thing from my mind . . .

~The End~

G.R. Bretz

### **About the Author**

G.R. Bretz grew up in rural central Pennsylvania. He attended college in Houston and settled in Fort Worth. One bitterly cold winter morning he packed his bags and caught the next flight to sunny Fort Lauderdale. He devotes his spare time to writing disturbing fiction and dodging hurricanes.