

THE GATE OF THE FALLEN ANGEL

BY LEWIS SHINER

IN HIS EMAIL, Cristóbal offered to meet her at La Puerta del Ángel Caido, Wednesday at four in the afternoon. Of course Renee said yes. She figured the maestro wanted to size her up and not risk having to throw her out of his studio if she didn't live up to expectations. The gate was on the southwest corner of El Parque del Retiro, Madrid's Central Park, 360 acres of trees and fountains and weird architecture. And supposedly the world's only public statue of the Devil. She agonized over everything. Overdressing might make her seem bourgeois and unserious. Too casual might look trampy. Getting there early could come off as overeager, too late as disrespectful. Bringing a portfolio was presumptuous, leaving it home self-defeating.

In the end she wore jeans, a black turtleneck that showed her shape but not her skin, and a man's blazer from a thrift shop. She brought a half-filled sketchbook and got there early enough to pretend she was working when Cristóbal arrived.

He was not what she expected. He wore a cheap suit, black with a chalk stripe, and a polyester tie. He had yellow-tinted sunglasses and his shoes were scuffed and dusty. It was common enough to see a paunch on a Spaniard pushing 70, though Renee had imagined him with less of one. And, like everyone else in the park, he had an iPhone stuck to the palm of his left hand.

He nodded appreciatively as she walked up, and he took her hand as if he meant to kiss it. «Señorita Inglemann. It's a pleasure.»

Apparently he wasn't going to kiss the hand, but he wasn't letting it go, either. She gently took it back and said, «It's a great honor for me, sir.»

«Señora Martín speaks very highly of you. She says it's unusual for someone of your youth to be so technically accomplished and so serious about painting.»

«Señora Martín is very kind.»

«Not in my experience. She also emailed me some photos of your work, which I found most impressive.»

Señora Martín had told her so, but hearing it from Cristóbal himself made her dizzy. A vision flashed across her inner eye, herself standing at MOMA in New York in front of one of her future paintings, a huge canvas whose details she couldn't make out.

«Shall we walk?» Cristóbal said.

The wrought-iron gate was wide open and a paved street led uphill at a steady incline. The sycamores--plane trees, the Europeans called them--threw off blizzards of yellow leaves, despite the unseasonable heat and clear skies. To their right was a gray government building where a herd of cats prowled the lawn. Half a dozen kids on skateboards, who she'd watched trudge uphill earlier, came roaring and rattling down again.

«What drove you to narrative painting?» Cristóbal finally asked. «It's hardly in fashion.»

In fact some galleries were trying to tout it as "contemporary classical," which Renee thought sounded like a radio format. She was used to the

question. Her professors liked to ask it when they wanted a jolt of academic jargon. She hoped Cristóbal was looking for more.

«Because of you, for one thing. I saw a reproduction of your *Exorcism* when I was in high school, and it was like...» She made an explosion with her hands. «I knew that's what I wanted to do.»

He was used to flattery. He brushed it away with his fingers like it was an ad on his phone. «Tell me what you saw in the painting.»

She closed her eyes for a second to bring back the image. «I saw faces of real people, so real I would recognize them if I ran into them in the street. At the same time there was never a moment where I could forget that I was looking at paint on canvas. They were human, and at the same time they were more than that, because they were Art.»

He didn't say anything, so she stumbled on. «You must think I'm stupid and idealistic.»

«I was remembering,» he said, «when I used to feel that way.»

A black police car patiently nosed by them. The Madrid cops drove on the sidewalks and through parks and pedestrian plazas, a constant but only vaguely threatening presence whose main effect was to make the ever-present African sidewalk merchants bundle up their counterfeit handbags and logowear and fade into the crowd. The government's main concern about the crashing Spanish economy was to keep the symptoms hidden from the tourists.

«So what is it you want from me?» Cristóbal asked.

«Two things. First of all, I have to do a thesis as part of my degree. You studied in the US with Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Dimitroff, who studied with Diego Rivera--»

Cristóbal finished the sentence for her. «--who studied with Chicharro, who studied with the great Sorolla. It's rather like Hesiod's Five Ages of Man, no? A slow and painful descent from the Golden Age to the Age of Iron.»

She couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic, or faking modesty, or truly running himself down. «That's not fair.»

«No, you're right. It doesn't give enough credit to Rivera, who was the best of the lot. He was the only one who truly had anything to say.»

«There's videos on YouTube of Bloch talking about Rivera, and it made me wonder if she ever passed along Rivera's stories about Chicharro...»

«Or Chicharro's stories about Sorolla? Yes. Yes, I will help you, and I will share my stories about the giants whose shoulders I stand on. What's the second thing?»

Everything she'd planned to say now sounded hopelessly arrogant.

«Perhaps I can guess,» Cristóbal said. «Perhaps you would like to be the next in the unbroken succession? Do you really see yourself in the company of Rivera and Sorolla?»

«Didn't you have big dreams when you were a student? Didn't Rivera? Didn't Sorolla?»

«I give lessons. It's one of my few reliable sources of income.»

«I know. And I can't afford them.»

«Ah.»

They had arrived at the fountain and Richard Bellver's bronze of Lucifer. He was human-sized, winged and naked, supported in mid-fall by a four-meter-high marble pedestal. One hand hid his face from the wrath of God. She'd studied it before, both the real thing here in the park and the resin copy in the Academia de Bellas Artes. This time she tried to see it through

Cristóbal's eyes and found she had no idea what he might be thinking.

«There's ambition for you,» he finally said. «Can you see his face?» The sun was low and the long shadows made it difficult. «It's the look of a man who has discovered that he has made a terrible miscalculation, that the world is not as he thought it was, that his dreams will never come true. The realization is literally, physically painful.»

Sensing her shock and disappointment, he said, «I'm sorry, you thought I was insulting you. I was actually speaking about myself.»

«You can't be serious. You've had a long and brilliant career.»

«I've never managed to make a reliable living from doing the thing I love. I pay my bills by teaching. I was never famous in America and now I'm largely forgotten here.»

«That's not true. You're a legend.»

Cristóbal laughed and pointed to Lucifer. «As is he.» He made the flicking gesture with his fingers again. «Let me see your sketchbook.»

Her throat squeezed shut as she handed him the book, but he only flipped to the last page and scrawled a phone number. «Call me Saturday morning. Not too early. I'll meet you at the university and you can show me your work.»

«I've just been here since August. I only have three paintings done and one in progress...»

«More than enough. I just want to see the paint.» He gestured toward a bench in the shade. «I'm going to rest here a while. You go on, now.»

He was pale, and Renee worried that the walk had been too much for him. «Are you okay?»

«I'm fine, I assure you.»

She glanced back from the top of the incline. He had forgotten her and was staring up at Lucifer's tortured face.

RENEЕ'S FIRST MEMORIES were of her brother Jeffrey's comics: *Spawn*, *Vampirella*, *Hellboy*. She'd been too young to remember her father, who disappeared one Friday between cashing his paycheck and making it back home. Her mother was a former primary school art teacher who had ended up as a supervisor at the North Carolina DMV in order to support two kids. When she caught Renee, all of four years old, trying to copy *Spawn*'s archenemy Malebolgia in crayon, she told Renee that she shouldn't be reading this kind of garbage in the first place, that Todd McFarlane was not a suitable artist to learn from, and that Renee clearly had no artistic talent. Even then, Renee felt the injustice of it. Not just that she was getting no slack for only being four, but that Jeffrey, as a boy, got to live up to a completely different set of expectations.

Jeffrey, five years older, was on her side. He kept her in art supplies and comics until her third-grade teacher recognized her talent and got her into a life drawing class at NC State. At which point her mother told everybody how she'd nurtured Renee's talent from infancy.

By ninth grade, her tastes had shifted to the Pre-Raphaelites, who taught her that comics were not the only pictures that could tell stories. Then, at 16, Julián Cristóbal's *Exorcism* opened up an entire universe of Spanish artists, from the classical perfection of Ribera and Velasquez to the dark, looming figures of El Greco to the sunlight-drenched beaches of Sorolla to the shiny allegories of Chicharro and the beautiful grotesques of José Gutiérrez Solano.

She believed that Madrid was her destiny. She put Spanish language courses on her iPod and walked the streets around the Prado via Google Earth.

She spent four years on scholarship at the Art Institute of Chicago, making mistakes and painting pictures that would embarrass her later. Her passion for her work was part of a whole emotional package. She went to bed with a few men, mostly older and artistic, and one woman, a girl-crush her freshman year. All of the relationships were full of white-hot intensity while they lasted, and none of them, ultimately, was as important as her work. Her work, which the emotional intensity fed.

When she won the fellowship to finish her Masters at the Complutense University of Madrid, she was overjoyed. At the same time, part of her felt like it was payback for the long, lonely years it had taken her to get that far.

THE FRIDAY NIGHT before she was supposed to meet Cristóbal at the university, terrorists attacked Paris. Suicide bombers at a football match, bombers and shooters at cafés and a rock show, over a hundred dead and many more wounded, hostages, a standoff. She slept badly that night and in the morning she drank coffee and huddled in front of La 1, the state-owned news channel, with her roommates. The Islamic State had taken responsibility for the attacks, surprising nobody.

Clara was from Sevilla and Pénélope was from Paris. Reassuring emails from Pénélope's friends and family hadn't done anything to ease her rage and despair. Her mood infected Renee, who finally tore herself away at ten o'clock to call Cristóbal.

«You've heard the news?» she asked.

«About Paris? Yes, yes.»

«You don't sound very upset.»

He sighed. «Can we talk about this in person? That is, if you still want me to look at your paintings.»

«Yes,» she said, feeling a reluctant, guilty excitement. «Yes, if you would. The news has totally thrown me off. I'll need some time to get ready. Is noon okay?»

«I'll see you at the studio.»

She showered and washed her hair and blew it mostly dry. She dressed in jeans and, on impulse, a low-cut white blouse, remembering his admiring look when they'd met. The weather was still insanely warm for mid-November, headed for a high of 22 degrees, which translated to something ridiculous in Fahrenheit. She threw on a cardigan and ran for the Metro.

She shared her cramped studio space in the Art building with four other painters. The floor was bare concrete, the light harsh and fluorescent, the windows non-existent. Her idea was to arrive well before him in hopes of influencing his first impression. When she got there, the door was open and he was already at the far end of the room, staring into one of her canvasses.

«I arranged with Señora Martín to let me in,» he said, not bothering to apologize. «I wanted some time alone with the pictures.»

He was looking at a painting she called *El Hogar*, "Home." In the foreground a middle-aged homeless woman crouched in stained sweat clothes, her grizzled hair pulled loosely back in a knot. One hand reached into a patch of bright white sunlight, dropping a few crumbs of bread, which a pigeon pecked at. The background was a graffiti-covered wall from the basement of La Tabacalera, an abandoned tobacco warehouse that had been occupied by

anarchists and artists.

Cristóbal leaned forward and sniffed at the canvas. «I love the smell of linseed oil, don't you? It's like the smell of orange peel. Sharp and real. It says, 'Wake up!' Acrylic smells like the plastic that it is.»

She stood behind him in silence. She'd forgotten to breathe.

«The technique is most impressive.» He pointed to the oilslick sheen of the pigeon's neck. «Here, for example. Also in the way you imply the texture of the woman's hair without getting lost in detail. It's an homage to Sorolla's *Comiendo en la barca*, no? With the real subject in the shadow and the sunlight blinding.»

«Yes,» Renee admitted.

«I like the ambiguity. The woman is free, but she is drab, not free and beautiful like the bird, not even like the painted walls that shelter her but also imprison her. She is hungry, but she is giving away what little she has.»

His approval was intoxicating. She wanted it to go on forever. Instead his tone changed. «The white of the sunlight, it's too white. I don't like it. Nothing is ever pure white. You must open yourself to the subtle emotions of color in the real world. You work from photos, no?»

«Yes, sure. Everybody does.»

«You're not everybody. A photo is a dead thing. Trying to bring it to life on canvas is like pushing a car uphill. Also, this is three different photos, no? The wall, the woman, the bird, all taken at different times, in different places.»

She blushed. «Yes.»

«The visual logic is missing. Where does the light come from? What is this space she's in? How did the bird get there? I see three ideas instead of a single, blinding, coherent inspiration. You can't start with discrete images and then move to the idea. It must happen all at once, spontaneous, organic. That's why you have to paint fast, attack the canvas with the biggest brushes you can handle. You build up to that climax with sketches. Do you draw every day?»

«Yes.»

«Draw more. Draw wherever you go. Gesture drawings of strangers on the street. Portraits, architecture. If you talk to a friend, draw him as you speak. These are your raw materials, not pixels arranged by a machine.»

She nodded, stretched to breaking between the extremes of praise and criticism.

«Okay,» he said. «Let's get a coffee.»

«Did you...not want to see anything else?»

«I looked at everything before you got here. Mostly I wanted to see the brushstrokes, the way you handled the paint.»

«And...?»

«It's good. It's very good.» He finally managed a smile. «Don't worry so much.»

How good? she wanted to ask. Good enough to someday stand with Sorolla or Solana? With Cristóbal?

They got on the gray Metro line and rode two quick stops to Argüelles, on the edge of the Malasaña barrio where full-on gentrification was cranking out the boutiques and trendy cafés and late-night clubs that her roommates kept trying to drag her to. On the way, Cristóbal asked if she followed fútbol, which she didn't, or drank wine, which she did, but didn't know anything about. Finally, as they were getting off the train, she said, «We were going to talk about Paris.»

Another sigh. «What's the point? It's like the weather. We destroyed the atmosphere, and because of that the planet will soon be uninhabitable. It's too late to stop it now, not that anyone is willing to give up their comforts even if we could, and yet people are surprised by the droughts and the hurricanes. The same way the West, especially your country, has looted the Middle East and Africa, and now we have the consequences. We can't give up oil, so we keep making things worse, and then we're surprised when people whose lives we've ruined want to kill us.»

«ISIS is different. ISIS is...they're satanic. They're pure evil. They murder their own followers for not being devout enough. They hate all women. They hate art. They hate history. They're dynamiting temples in Syria, two-thousand-year-old temples that we can't ever get back. They murdered those artists at *Charlie Hebdo*. What kind of monsters would do that?»

Cristóbal's tone was oddly gentle. «If you push somebody hard enough, who knows what he might do? I can't speak for the jihadists, but I would imagine that to them, our art looks like lies.»

She felt like Cristóbal was deliberately provoking her. «Great art doesn't lie. That's what makes it great.»

«Beauty is truth, truth beauty, and that's all you need to know? You and Keats's pisspot. Have you never seen *Triumph of the Will*? A work of stunning beauty, and a most virulent lie from start to finish.»

«Does that give you the right to burn every copy of it?»

«Not the right, no. But let's say my parents died at Auschwitz and my son shaved his head and tattooed swastikas on his arms. Would you blame me then if I wanted to burn it?»

«Yes.»

Cristóbal laughed. «I envy you a little. The way the world is so clear to you.»

He had led her to a Starbucks on La Calle de la Princesa, an upscale shopping street. Next door was yet another multistory location of the giant department store chain El Corte Inglés. The Starbucks had bright green umbrellas over the outdoor tables, shining windows that invited them in.

He saw her expression. «You object to the global corporate chain?»

«Yes.»

«Ah.» He held the door open for her. «But the coffee is so good.»

She didn't order anything, even though Cristóbal offered to pay. He seemed totally comfortable with their being at odds. Renee was not. They sat at one of the outdoor tables and, honoring his own advice, Cristóbal took a black hardbound sketchbook out of his shoulder bag and began to draw her.

Self-conscious, looking for common ground, she said, «What are you working on these days?»

«I am, as they say, 'between major works.' I'm finishing up a couple of commissioned portraits. It's a struggle not to just give them what they really want, something to flatter their egos.»

«I'd like to see your studio.»

«I don't see why not. It's less interesting than you imagine, just a garage behind my house, hard to warm in the winter, miserably hot in the summer.»

He turned to a new page and started again. His hand moved with quick precision, like a conductor's.

«You, however,» he said, «are on fire, I think. Full of ideas. Unable to finish one painting before you start the next.»

«Being in a different country gives me so much energy. I never want to sleep. And then all the museums...»

«Which is your favorite?»

«I love them all, of course, but if I had to pick one, it would be the Academia de Bellas Artes. Because of two rooms on the third floor. The first has *Comiendo en la barca* and the Chicharros, and the next one has Solana and your *Día de todos los santos*.»

«One day you'll be in there too.»

She was soaring again. «Really? Do you really think so?»

«I guarantee it.»

«Does that mean you'll teach me? Even though I can't pay you?»

«I will if you sit for me.»

Plummeting now. «You mean pose for a painting.»

«Yes.»

His expression gave him away. «Nude?» she asked.

He shrugged, meaning yes. «You are very beautiful. And when you were talking about the museum just now, your passion animated your entire body. It was inspiring.»

«You have no idea,» she said, «what it's like trying to compete as a woman. There are so many ways to fail. If I posed for you, and I went on to be successful, people would make...assumptions about it, about what I did to get that success.»

«You're a very good painter. I could make you great.»

«I can't...I won't...»

His only response was to shrug again, both hands palm up, the pencil still in his fingers.

The chair made an ugly grinding noise as she pushed it back from the table. She hesitated, trying furiously to find a way to save the moment, but no, it was gone. Had never, she realized, really existed.

She knew he was watching as she walked away, recording the gesture of her hips in his book, and she broke into a run, tears burning down her face.

CLARA, HER SPANISH ROOMMATE, told her she was a prude. Pénélope insisted she'd done the right thing. «You don't need him,» she said in her fractured mix of Spanish and French. «You will be great and he will be forgotten for the dirty old man that he is.»

For a month, every time the phone rang, she hoped it would be Cristóbal with second thoughts. In January she told her thesis advisor that Cristóbal would not cooperate. Her advisor sent her to the library, where she found reams of published interviews with Cristóbal that gave her everything she needed.

She told Señora Martín that she'd been unable to work out an arrangement with Cristóbal. Señora Martín was surprised and said she'd seen his influence in her latest work. Renee had in fact stopped using photo references, at least for her human figures, and had been pushing herself to paint faster. It had made her more expressive and less literal.

By late February, she went days at a time where she hardly thought of him.

When he died on the 29th of a sudden, massive heart attack, it was national news. Señora Martín appeared on La 1, standing in front of *Día de todos los santos*. He had named her curator of his artistic estate, and she talked about his legacy at a length that US TV would never have put up with.

The next Wednesday, she kept glancing at Renee during class with a weird little half-smile. After class, Renee asked her, «Is there something I should know?»

That funny smile again. «I finally went into his studio. I saw the painting.»

The room went out of focus. «What painting?»

«*Ángel caído*, of course.»

«I don't know what you're talking about.»

«Well, you obviously posed for it. Don't worry, I'm not going to judge you. I was his mistress once myself, many years ago, back when I was your age.»

«I was not his mistress!» She finally processed the rest of what she'd heard. «Wait. You were?»

«I was not a student of his, just a student, making some extra cash as a life drawing model. He gave me to understand that with an artist of his reputation, if you posed for him, naturally you were expected to sleep with him as well.»

Naturally, Renee thought.

«All nonsense.» Señora Martín went on, «but I was so in awe of him that I was more than willing. We carried on for two and a half years before he broke it off, saying his wife was suspicious. As if his wife hadn't known all along. I suppose he was just tired of me. I was the woman in the mirror in *Canto antifonal*, I was *Desnudo* numbers 37 and 41, lots of others. Hundreds of thousands of men have seen my naked body because of him.» She laughed, ran a hand over the curve of her stomach. «It *was* quite a body back then.»

Renee had barely listened. There was a hissing sound in her head. «Show me the painting.»

Señora Martín glanced at her watch. «I have a faculty meeting at...» She looked at Renee's face. «All right. All right, I'll take you now.»

THE PART OF RENEE'S BRAIN that was capable of objective thought recognized that it was an important picture, full of hints of Cristóbal's impending death. He'd created the impression that the glow at the heart of the painting was fading and darkness closing in. The light came from a woman who lay naked in tangled white--but not pure white--sheets, a post-coital warmth to her drowsy smile, a flush still visible high on her large, soft breasts. Her posture invoked Goya's *Maja desnuda* as reshot by *Playboy*.

The face was Renee's, and so were the approximate outlines of the body. The nipples were not small and brown like Renee's, but plump and pink like those of the women in Chicharro's *Tentaciones de Buda*, porn-star nipples. Likewise, the hairless mons was not hers. Not that anyone would care, even if she were willing to strip down to prove it.

In the foreground lay a pile of hastily discarded clothes, including, she noted with shame, the low-cut white blouse she'd worn to their last meeting. Just visible, sticking out from the bottom of the pile, was a white feathered wing.

«It's like he could see Death descending,» Señora Martín whispered. «And the only thing holding it back is you, even if only for the moment.»

«It's not me,» Renee said. «It's a lie.»

She realized what she'd just said. Had Cristóbal really gone to this length just to teach her a lesson?

«You're serious, aren't you?» Señora Martín said. «You really didn't pose for this?»

Renee told her about her last conversation with Cristóbal. «You can't let anyone see this,» Renee said. «It would destroy my career.»

«I hardly think that. If anything, it could make you famous.»

«Famous for the wrong thing! That's all anybody cares about anymore. A few days of being viral on the Internet. I want to make something that lasts. Something that touches people, that changes the way they see the world. I don't want to be the artist who fucked Cristóbal. I want to be Renee Inglemann! I want to stand or fall on my own work.» She was crying. «I have the right to that much. It's not fair for the lies of a dead man to take that away.»

Señora Martín gently gathered her up and patted her back. «I'll see what I can do.»

HUMILIATED AND AFRAID, Renee didn't tell anyone what had happened. She watched TV and surfed the web, unable to focus. Pénélope tried repeatedly to get her to open up, and Renee let her assume it was a broken heart from a secret love affair.

She couldn't finish her master's thesis or study for exams. Señora Martín helped her get an extension through the end of the summer. She refused to go back to the States for fear that *Ángel caído* would turn up in her absence. Her fellowship ran out and she got a waitressing job in Malasaña to cover her bills. She couldn't paint, couldn't sketch, couldn't look at anybody else's art.

In August, Señora Martín called her into her office.

«The Academia de Bellas Artes is buying *Ángel caído*.»

Renee felt almost relieved that the worst had finally happened. «I thought you were going to protect me.»

«We have an understanding that they won't put it on public display. Only scholars and members of the Academy will be able to see it. There's no reason to think that any of them will recognize you. I'm sorry. It had to be done. Cristóbal left considerable debts and there was no other way to get his family out from under them. I brought in an expert to evaluate the painting and...in a matter of days it was out of my hands.»

Renee found she had nothing left to say.

«It's going to be all right,» Señora Martín said. «Have faith. Finish your thesis, take your exams, get on with your life.»

Renee walked out without saying goodbye.

WHEN THE NEWS BROKE, it was everywhere. One last masterpiece by the greatest Spanish painter of the last half of the twentieth century. To be given pride of place on the third floor of the Academy, next to Sorolla and Chicharro, whose unbroken lineage he represented.

The night of the unveiling, they showed the painting on TV. Renee was in bed, trying to read, and heard the screams from the living room. Pénélope flung her door open in an ecstasy of excitement. «Oh my God! You're on La Una! You have to come see!»

«No, thanks.»

«Why did you tell me you turned him down?»

«I did turn him down.»

«Come on, Renee...»

It would be like this, Renee understood, from then on.

SHE PAID SIX EUROS at the weathered stone entrance of the Academia de Bellas Artes and passed through the glass door to the foyer. Worn granite staircases led upward on either side. She took the elevator to the third floor and moved counterclockwise through the rooms, pretending to look at the paintings. Despite the warm fall weather, she wore a hoodie and kid gloves she'd bought at El Rastro, the giant Sunday flea market near her apartment. Her sunglasses made her feel conspicuous, though not as conspicuous as she would have felt without them. She imagined children stopping to point at her and say, "Look, Mommy, it's the lady from the painting."

She stopped in front of *Ángel caído*. It was a Thursday, two in the afternoon, siesta time and an hour before the museum closed, and the third floor was nearly deserted. A single guard patrolled the entire wing, and Renee only had to wait a long, agonizing minute before she was alone in the room.

Now, she told herself. Do it now.

She took the glass water bottle out of her oversized purse and unscrewed the green plastic top. Her hands shook. She should have expected that, but she hadn't.

She'd practiced the motion with water against the side of her apartment building. She raised the bottle straight up over her head and with a sharp, downward thrust she hurled the contents against the canvas.

The results were immediate. The paint ran, then began to boil. She stood fascinated for two or three seconds as a cloud of sour brown fumes rose off the melting canvas. She dropped the glass container on the floor and it rolled to the wall below the painting.

Some of the sulphuric acid had splashed on her shoes, and they were starting to smoke. She kicked them off and turned to go. Even then she might have gotten away, except that a few drops had spilled onto her right hand, her painting hand, and they had already burned through the cheap leather and into her skin.

She peeled off the gloves and ran for the bathroom, and that was where they found her, holding her burned hand under cold running water.

RENEE WAS IN a minimum security wing, meaning that she was allowed to sit across a table from Señora Martín. The few women prisoners were strictly segregated from the men, so she and Señora Martín had the visiting room to themselves, except for one guard who watched them from three meters away.

Renee had so far served a month in the Soto del Real federal prison north of Madrid. She had five years and eleven months to go, and her loneliness ached like a wound. Her mother believed her a terrorist. Her brother, whose heart, he said, was with her, was working 60-to-70-hour weeks for a start-up in Palo Alto and couldn't come to Spain. She was so desperate for conversation that she'd agreed to see Señora Martín in spite of her pride.

«How's your hand?» Señora Martín asked.

The burns were superficial and had healed completely, though the scar was not nice to look at. «It's fine.»

Señora Martín put a sketchbook and some pencils on the table. «I got permission to bring you these. I thought you might want them.»

«Why?»

Señora Martín, shocked, pulled her hand away.

«I'll never sell a painting. I'll never get within a mile of an art school, not even as a student, let alone as a teacher. Any remote chance of a career I might have had is gone forever.»

«Actually, I've had a few discreet inquiries.»

«From who? People who collect paintings by Hitler and John Wayne Gacy?» Señora Martín flushed and looked away. «No. No, thank you.»

Stung, Señora Martín said, «It was your own choice that put you here.»

Renee stood up, and the guard took a step toward them. «When I'm lying in my cell at night,» she said, «the only comfort I have is knowing that that painting is gone. If I had it to do over, I wouldn't hesitate for a second.» She looked down at her hand. «I might be a little more careful with the acid.»

«Wait,» Señora Martín said. «Please. Don't go.»

Renee hesitated, holding the back of her chair.

«Cristóbal was a bitter and unhappy man,» Señora Martín said. «All of this is his fault. *His* fault, not the fault of Art.»

Renee's jaw muscles tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed. «Is that all?»

Señora Martín nodded. «Just...please. Take the sketchbook. Just in case.»

SHE WOKE THAT NIGHT from a dream of Señora Martín. In the dream, Señora Martín was Renee's age. She wore a white dress and she was waltzing, alone, without music, in a vast, empty room. Renee had no idea what it meant, but the dream was so vivid, so visual, that she couldn't shake it. She lay on her back and listened to the woman in the bunk overhead as she moaned in her sleep.

It was never completely dark in the Soto del Real. Not light enough to read, but light enough to see a pencil line.

Renee got out the sketchbook. She lay on the floor by the bars at the front of her cell, where the light filtered in from the passageway, and stared at the empty page.