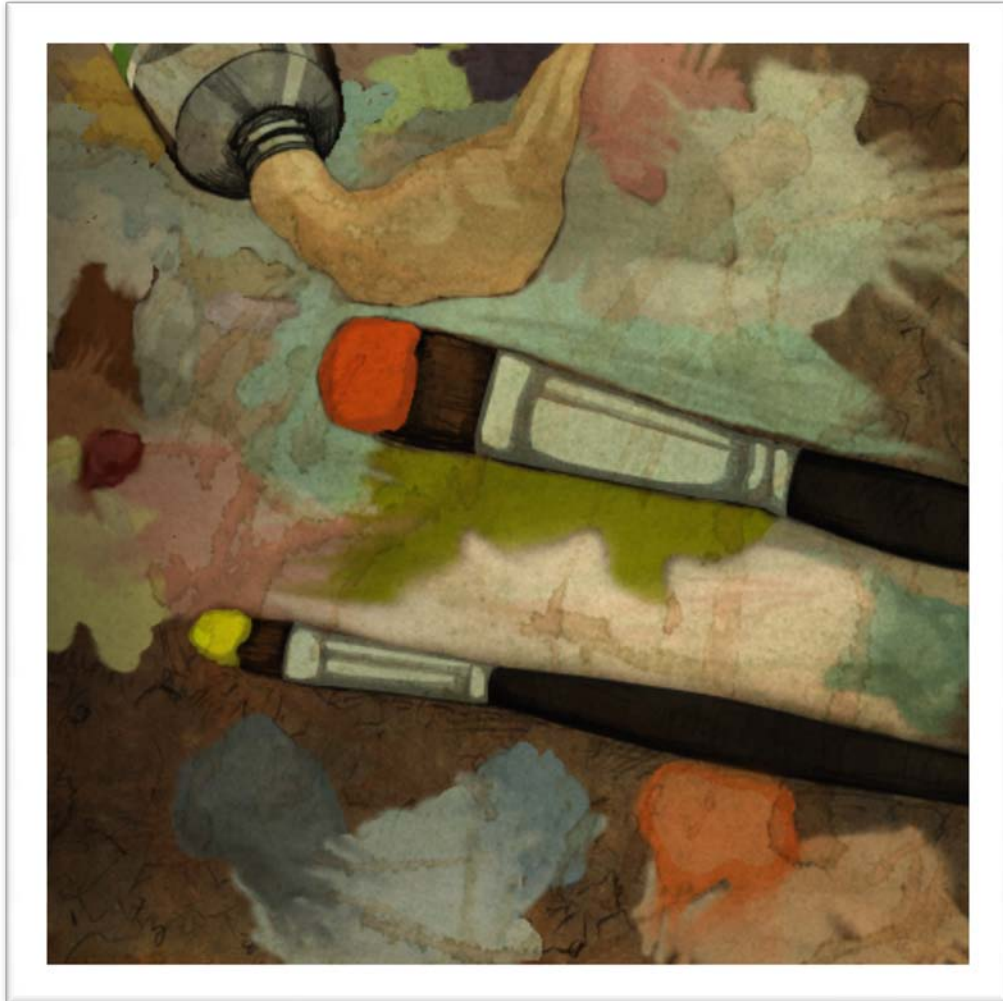




## THE THIRTEEN NUDES OF ERNEST GOINGS



## The Thirteen Nudes of Ernest Goings

Amanda Goings parked her station wagon in the unpaved drive to her mother's two story white clapboard house with green trim and a pitched roof that had kept snows from long Maine winters collecting and crushing the Goings family. The curtains parted on a window to the right of the door. The interior lights were turned off and it was too dark see, but she waved to let her mother know she'd be back in a few minutes to take her to the luncheon. The curtain fell back in place.

She walked fifty yards to the stonewall at the edge of the property, her rubber-soled shoes unsteady on the sheets of wet leaves under the maples and the walnut tree. She came to a ragged break that had been there since her childhood. For thirty-two years, the wall was the divider between the Goings family's property and the neighboring property recently purchased by her father.

She climbed the knoll and passed through a line of cedars. She stumbled near the top, she turned in foot and withered left leg from a birth defect failing to support her adequately. On the downhill slope, invisible from her mother's house and the road, was a barn, the only structure that remained on the property. She swore as she always did when she saw the two rectangular roof skylights that mirrored northern light from grey overhead clouds. She thought the expensive renovation of the barn a waste of money – split levels floored with slate and twelve-inch antique

floorboards, directional track lighting, and an open-loft living facility adjacent to a studio with rows of vertical racks for drying and storage of paintings.

She knocked at the door to the right of the original swinging doors that had been sealed and left as authentic-residual decoration. She heard nothing.

“Goddamn it,” she yelled. “Answer the door.” Her father was probably up. It was eleven o’clock, but his hours had been erratic since he had begun living alone in the barn.

“I’m busy,” he called back from the silent interior.

She took out a letter-size fold-over brochure from her inside coat pocket.

“The promotion is in from New York.”

“Leave it,” he said. She heard the twang of a guitar string, the pitch mounting as a peg was screwed tighter. Then she heard the six disparate notes of an unharmonious chord. He had no ear for music. And he practiced often now, his foot tapping behind the beat of sixties rockers he played on a cassette recorder.

She opened the lid to a dark-green painted tin mailbox, slipped the brochure in, and let the lid drop.

The Cottontail Inn conference room dining facility had only four windows on one sidewall that gave little light, and the rheostats on the faux carriage lamps along the wall had to be cranked up to highest intensity. The room was set with white cloth-draped circular tables, and many of the seated women of the Rockton Garden Club had to turn their chairs to see Amanda on the small speaker’s stage at the end of the room. A tubular reading light glowed on the podium next to the gooseneck mike.

Amanda tilted up on her toes to see. She tapped the microphone with the middle finger of her right hand. The members had finished their chicken entrée, but still took a few seconds to direct their attention to Amanda.

“Welcome,” Amanda said. She thanked Mertha Williams, the club president, for the success of the luncheon and the club. “The Ernest Goings Foundation has always been pleased to sponsor these quarterly meetings of the Garden Club,” she continued, “and today’s door prize is Ernest’s new book of full color reproductions of his most popular paintings, ‘Barn Doors in Lincoln County.’ Mother, would you draw the winning slip?”

As her mother came forward, Amanda stood as tall as she could on her good leg to make a presence when she greeted her mother. This provincial crowd underappreciated Amanda, and some still thought her father really managed his art career. But it was Amanda’s shrewd business skills that had anchored her father’s success over the last ten years. She was not some nepotistic add on.

Amanda’s mother, Margaret, selected one slip of paper from among many in a shoebox that was traditional for these drawings and brought forward by a volunteer. Margaret said nothing, and handed the winning slip to Amanda before returning to her seat.

And the winner? Tall and thin Fabia Worthington, who approached the podium without joy; she didn’t like Ernest Goings’ bucolic, hyper-realistic paintings, and adored Renoir. Amanda held the book-prize above her head for a few seconds for all to see before handing it to Fabia, who flipped through the pages. “No nudes?” she said. The audience laughed.

Amanda leaned closer to the microphone. "Fabia is kind to remind us that Ernest will show his new series of figure paintings next Thursday at the Slade Gallery in Boston on Newbury Street. Please join us." Then she walked back to her mother and her mother's friends, Julia and Sally, at a prominently placed table for four. Mertha gave the financial report and assigned committees for the spring garden show. Dessert was served.

"My goodness, Margaret," Sally whispered. "Thirteen nudes!"

"Ernest was always good at figure drawing," Margaret said. She had always been awed by his talent.

"Maine landscapes made him famous," Julia said smiling. "He should sow the seeds from plants that won last year's awards."

"It's his love of nature that makes his scenes come alive," Amanda said.

"Who knows what makes a painting good?" Sally said.

"He's always had a special gift," Margaret said.

"His art has touched millions," Amanda added.

"Not nudes," Sally said.

"They're portraits of a girl," Amanda said firmly.

"You can't judge the nudes," Julia said to Amanda. "You're all business."

"She is definitely a woman," Sally said. "You can see that." Sally picked up one of the brochures that had been placed at every table, showing a minute photo of one of the paintings; she waved it at Amanda. Julia nodded.

Amanda watched her mother closely. Margaret's eyes had lost focus, and she pushed her lower lip behind her upper teeth to control the trembling.

"I wouldn't trust my husband in the barn alone with a woman, clothed or unclothed," Julia said to Margaret. "How did you let him get away with it?"

"The mother was with the model," Margaret said emphatically.

"That's not what I heard," Julia said.

"Don't be catty," Amanda said. "She was only fifteen. Artists and models have strict professional standards."

Eunice, an indigent mother, had brought her daughter, Hester, for the early modeling sessions, until she found domestic work. After that, Hester went to the barn alone, disappearing over the ridge out of view.

"I'm sure it was her gift of holding still that attracted Ernest," Sally said sarcastically.

"That's not appropriate," said Amanda. These women were the foulest, most malevolent weeds of this community, and they made Amanda want to get out of rural Maine; she had an MBA – and national acclaim – and had job offers in D.C., Atlanta, and Oregon.

"You're too sensitive, Amanda," Julia said.

Amanda touched the arm of her mother to comfort her. Her mother had slumped in her chair, her eyes closed, no doubt hoping for a biting response to come to her to silence Sally and Julia.

"You're not still cooking for Ernest's sales, are you?" Julia asked Margaret.

Margaret leaned forward and clasped one hand in the other in her lap under the table to hide her tremor. "It wouldn't be a Goings' opening without our traditions," she said, bringing up her chin slightly. She baked sugar cookies shaped

liked painters' palettes, with thumbholes and tan and brown chocolate chips along the edges that melted during cooking to suggest oil paints squeezed from a tube. She stacked the cookies on china platters on a linen-covered card table near the reception table at the door, far away from the catered opaque-eyed salmon, the bacon-wrapped warmed scallops, and the wedged sandwiches bulging with cold sprouts.

"It's a disgrace. After all you've done for him," Julia said.

Sally said. "He's treated you like dirt."

"Oh, Ernest loves it," Margaret said looking off into the distance. "And I do it for his fans. They expect it after all these years." Her voice was now shaky and her neck veins pulsing.

"Don't be a slave," Julia said. "It's embarrassing."

As Amanda stood, her chair scraped the bare wooden floors. She gripped her mother's arm. "We've got work to do," she said. She led her mother out of the inn.

When Amanda and Margaret reached home, Margaret refused Amanda's suggestion for coffee. She would not take her pills.

"They don't know art," Margaret said.

"They thrive on the salacious remark, Mother. No matter what the topic."

"He shouldn't have used the barn."

"It must have been innocent."

"No one believes that," Margaret said, and she lay face down on the sofa, weeping.

“They’re not your friends, Mother,” Amanda said. “Forget them.”

Amanda ran the many branches of the Goings’ business in her small, private, but well-appointed office at the family-owned gallery and art store in Rockton. She was reviewing the pricing for the show in Boston. Paintings sold at record prices in five or six figures, and Amanda turned enviable profits by negotiating the lowest commission for each painting.

It was Saturday, and Christina, who worked gallery sales on weekends, knocked on the office door.

“Eunice Cummings is here,” she said. “She won’t leave.”

She was Hester’s--the model--mother.

Amanda looked at an appointment book. “I could see her Tuesday afternoon at three.”

But the door opened, and Eunice Cummings pushed Christina aside and walked in. “Got no time, Tuesday,” she said.

“She wouldn’t leave,” Christina apologized.

Eunice stood in front of Amanda’s desk, her hands in the pockets of her hand-knitted grey-green wool sweater, speechless. Her round face – spotted with facial hair on her chin and lip – had a grayish cast, her brown eyes looked down, her lips pursed.

“What can I do for you, Eunice?”

Eunice was thin and her jeans hung loose. She wore a light green down jacket stitched in large squares, and a maroon woolen ski cap pulled down over her ears.

“Mrs. Pritchard said she’d get her son to take me and Hester to the opening in Boston,” Eunice said.

The wealthy and stylish patrons on Newbury Street would probably hand Eunice a toilet brush and a mop when she walked into Slade Gallery. But the shows were open to the public. Amanda nodded. “You’ll enjoy it,” she said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Is there something specific you want, Eunice?”

“Hester wants her due,” Eunice said.

Amanda leaned back in her swivel chair, her feet, in running shoes, dangling.

“He promised her ten percent of them paintings,” Eunice said.

Amanda stared.

“He said he was going to treat her right.”

Amanda breathed deeply. “Slow down, Eunice.” Amanda swiveled a quarter turn in her chair, pushing with her leg. “Hester was paid the standard modeling fee. I’ve seen the cancelled checks.”

“He showed her indecent, to my mind,” Eunice said.

“You signed for the permission.”

“Not for what is in that foldout.”

“We don’t pay a percentage of sales to a model,” Amanda said. But previous models had always been clothed, old, sturdy people who wore hats to block the sun

or catch the rain, and always at a distance, on the porch of a farmhouse or on the dock with commercial fishing boats in the background.

“I got a lawyer. An esquire. He’s going to write you a letter. I just come to see if you’d do right without us paying him all that money.”

Ten percent was at least three-hundred thousand dollars. Eunice remained standing, waiting for an answer.

“He told her lies,” Eunice continued.

Amanda’s father was capable of avoiding truth, usually by prolonged, miserable silences.

“He said he loved her.”

“You heard him?”

“Hester don’t lie.”

Eunice stared at her unblinking, and a tear trickled down Eunice’s face to the left of her nose.

Amanda had to be practical. “I’d be careful about spreading rumors, Eunice.”

Eunice didn’t hesitate. “Ain’t never been one to talk bad about folks. Never.”

“Well, don’t get your hopes up. We are not paying a percentage of sales.”

Eunice’s gaze went distant, somewhere behind Amanda. She was trembling with frustration. When words failed, she left the office breathing hard and fast.

Amanda dismissed Christina. Her heart was still pounding, and she sat with her head back, her eyes closed. After a few minutes, she called artists she knew well and confirmed their hourly rates for models, never with residual compensations.

Then she itemized every check and cash withdrawal marked for modeling fees.

Hester had definitely been paid more than required by common practice. For the last sessions, it seemed sometimes she was given, by Ernest, excessive compensation for time spent, and without a reason noted in the “for” column.

Amanda knocked on the front door of the barn-studio, and when there was no answer, she tried the knob. It was unlocked. Her father rarely answered the studio door, and never when he was painting. A thirty-six by fifty-two inch canvas primed with a burnt sienna wash was mounted, and totally dry, on his prime easel. He was at his workbench stretching canvas over handmade stretchers. Two canvasses freshly gessoed were propped against the wall. He prepared daily, but he hadn’t finished a painting since he stopped painting Hester. Amanda closed the door.

“We need to talk,” Amanda said.

“Well, hello to you,” he said.

“Cut that off,” Amanda said, nodding at the boom box on the workbench.

He looked briefly to Amanda then back to his work, irritated, as if Amanda were an inferior model begging for work.

Amanda pushed the off toggle switch on the player.

“Eunice Cummings came to me today. She expects ten percent of sales of the Hester portraits.”

“That woman’s deranged,” he said, looking away from her and picking up ridged canvas pliers from a workbench. He gripped the edge of the linen canvas.

“You never promised?”

"I never talked to her after the first few sessions. She stopped coming." He fastened the canvas, seven sharp hits from a pneumatic staple-gun.

"She says you told Hester."

He looked sharply at her. "Don't bring Hester into it." He leaned the canvas on edge against the leg under the table.

"You painted her!"

He walked to a large picture window to look out, his hands clasped behind his head. "Hester is off limits, Amanda. None of your business."

She moved to where he could not ignore her.

"Eunice has a lawyer. Hester *is* my business."

"Eunice is lying." His breathing was shallow. "She took the modeling fees."

"Everyone in town thinks something happened in the barn."

He walked two steps away from Amanda. She could see only his backside.

"Don't accuse me."

"I'm asking for the truth."

"You're prying."

Amanda grabbed his arm but he refused to turn. "What did you do?"

"Don't be a bitch. I painted a girl. And I did it well."

She let go and moved back, still facing him.

"We've handed out the brochure. Nudes, everyone said. Not child figure studies."

"Those sessions were hard work, Amanda. I spent more than a year finally doing something more than rocks and curtains blowing through an open window."

“You painted a fifteen year-old girl alone with you in a barn. We all wonder about that.”

“I captured that beautiful balance between innocence and sexuality. Nobody alive has done what I’ve done.”

Paintings were a product to Amanda. She never studied her father’s paintings. She had only suspicions of what an artist or an art critic would think.

He walked to the small refrigerator near a sink set in a small counter top. He bent over and took a soda. He turned to Amanda, sweeping with his free hand long, uneven strands of gray hair with dark streaks from his face. His blues eyes, now more faded watercolor than the rich cobalt oil-paint blue of his youth, fixed on the wall above and behind Amanda. He drank from the can.

“A scandal could end your career,” she said.

“Hester will never accuse. Trust me. She’s not the type.” He smiled.

“Our fame and fortune are at stake here.”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “Manage the business, Amanda. That’s what you’re good at.” Then he stepped on the trashcan foot-pedal; the lid opened and he tossed the can, which disappeared. “I’m an artist. Hester was a model. No one needs to know more.”

“I’m not sure I can bury this.”

“We’re already in the money. Marty’s presold four of the nudes. They’re exceptional.”

“Not if the circumstances are clouded by suspicion.”

“Great art is great art. It moves people in different ways.”

He looked at her as if she were a gnarled downed tree limb that needed to be removed from the yard. What did he want in a daughter?

“Well. Don’t ignore Mother at the reception,” Amanda said, buttoning her coat. “You at least owe her that.”

She let herself out the door.

Hester Cummings did seasonal counterwork at the cold-serve lobster-roll shack in Wiscasset. She left work and met Amanda outside on a path a few feet from the low highway bridge spanning the Sheepscot River. She had kept Amanda waiting for half an hour.

“Are you still modeling?” Amanda asked when they stood together. Hester was close to five feet five, and Amanda tilted her head back slightly to see Hester’s vacant face with uneasy eyes.

“The lawyer said I shouldn’t talk to you,” Hester said.

“To me? Or anyone?”

“He said you’d be the one asking me questions.” Hester stared at Amanda, her hands, palm in, tucked in the back pockets of her tight jeans skirt. She had put on weight.

“But you’re talking to me.”

“I didn’t like him too good.”

When Hester smiled a little, Amanda smiled too. Amanda’s smile was her best feature. She felt cheated on good features. Her hair was scraggly and a dull

brown, and a childhood pox had pitted her skin with scars. But her smile made people relax, and speak more freely.

“Did my father promise more than a modeling fee, Hester?”

“He said I meant a lot to him.”

“Did he say he loved you?”

Hester hesitated. “Yes, ma’am.”

“He doesn’t paint you anymore. You okay with that?”

“He got done with his series.”

“You still see him?”

Hester looked away.

“And you think he’ll do you right?” Amanda asked.

“Course he will. When he can.” She straightened and her head went back defiantly. She glared down at Amanda.

For a while, Amanda looked at a lobster boat coming to dock. Then she looked back at Hester. “Do you love him?”

Hester squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds as if to cry, but didn’t answer.

“Did he say he’d pay you ten percent?”

“That’s what he said I was worth.”

Amanda leaned a few inches closer. “It’s hard to believe, Hester. We’ve never promised that to a model.”

Hester looked away again. “You wouldn’t know about modeling. You ain’t that pretty.”

They stood in silence. Although Hester had matured early to a soft, almost plump fertility, she stood with her head slightly down, her toes turned in, her arms hanging awkwardly like a child. And, despite what she thought, being young was her only asset. She must have thrived on the attention from posing. How real posing must have made her feel; Ernest's constant stares for discovery made her needy and wondrous, submissive and hungry. Was Hester in love with her father? Or was she just curious about men?

"I loved a man," Amanda said. "I couldn't be without him."

"I heard about him. He left you."

"In a way. He killed himself," Amanda said. When Amanda was in the MBA program in Boston, she had loved the brilliant but sullen Jimmy Headman. His lovemaking still haunted her. She had not found anyone like him.

"Loving hurts a lot, don't it? I mean, like it isn't all feeling good."

"He went to take care of his demented mother in Canada."

"Look. I ain't saying no more," Hester said. "Lawyer said you'd try to trick me."

She turned toward the shack.

"I won't trick you," Amanda said wearily.

"You're tough as nails, Miss Amanda. No one can trust you."

Amanda shook her head as Hester turned and walked away. "Most people don't feel that way," she said when Hester couldn't hear.

Amanda waited until Hester disappeared back into the shack, then she turned to gaze at the water. Colorful buoys marking submerged lobster traps bobbed on the wind-whipped surface. The water was dark grey.

Early on the day of the opening, Amanda parked in the drive of her mother's house. It was biting cold in the mornings now, and the two oaks on each side of her parents' house had dropped the last of their brown shriveled leaves. Amanda helped her mother load groceries, linens and the folding card table into the car. Her mother shivered in a light green dress and a skimpy raincoat that she thought was her most attractive outfit since she'd lost thirteen pounds.

Amanda drove. They traveled in silence through small towns until they got to Brunswick. They stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts for coffee and doughnuts that they ate in the car.

"Did you talk to him?" Margaret picked small bits of a plain cake donought with her thumb and forefinger. She would eat less than a third, throw the rest away.

Amanda did not answer. Her father took up too much precious space in their lives that he didn't deserve.

"He was improper?" Margaret persisted.

"He's such an asshole. He's never been open about anything."

Margaret put her doughnut and half-filled small coffee cup into a bag.

"You talked to the girl," Margaret said.

"She loves him," Amanda replied. "But I can't prove she screwed him."

"I'm in the way of their happy life together?"

“She’s filled with need and wonder, Mother. I doubt she thinks about you.”

Amanda placed her trash in the bag and climbed out of the car to deposit it in a barrel. She got back in and started the car without replying.

“Don’t you think she’s retarded?” Margaret said.

“She’s shy, mother. And afraid. But she’s not evil. I feel sorry for her.”

They were soon on the I-95 south for Boston. Margaret sat with her hands flat on her thighs staring ahead at the traffic.

“He should never have painted her,” Margaret said after they passed the tollbooth.

“He gave her a sense of self she’d never known,” Amanda said. “And probably will never know again.”

“I called Angus Partridge. Sex with a minor is illegal whether it gave her a sense of self or not.”

Amanda passed an eighteen-wheeler. She liked to keep exactly five miles an hour above the speed limit. Amanda didn’t care if her mother was talking to Angus about divorce proceedings, but she dreaded the battle. Margaret stared ahead as if some rock wall would emerge on the highway and end their lives.

“I don’t think he’s finished one canvas since he stopped painting that girl,” Margaret said softly.

“He thinks the success of the show will override the suspicions,” Amanda said. “And if he did have sex with her, I doubt Hester would ever testify, or that he’d ever be successfully prosecuted even if charged.” But even if the show were a

success and Ernest went on unscathed by opinions, the marriage was over. Amanda felt a new resolve to never marry.

Amanda steered the car into the fast lane. Maybe a quick settlement with Eunice would be necessary to cut off the publicity as soon as possible.

“He’s only good at barn doors,” Margaret said.

Amanda meter-parked on the street in Boston and helped her mother carry ingredients and utensils to the gallery. The front door to the showroom was locked – the gallery was closed two days for instillation of the new show – and Amanda used her key to enter the side door. In the kitchen, Margaret stored cookie dough in the refrigerator, turned on one of three baking ovens to preheat, and washed two bowls for cheese straws. They had a few hours before the caterers arrived at five-thirty.

“I want to see the show before I bake,” Margaret said.

“I’ll meet you in the gallery,” Amanda said, and she walked to the small room she used as an office during shows. She took a manila folder out of her briefcase and carried it to the showroom to confirm inventory.

Her mother had turned on the lights. Amanda had seen only a few of the paintings; her visits to the barn were for business, and the few canvasses she had seen were partially finished. Now the nudes were prominently mounted in gold leaf frames with traditional Goings’ landscapes in between.

“Mama?” Amanda said.

Her mother slumped on a side chair, staring. She pointed to a life-size frontal view of Hester gazing wide-eyed from the canvas. Hester's buttocks splayed over the edge a porcelain sink, her hands on the edge for support. Both feet were spread apart and flat on the floor. She dominated the space with detail – every hair seemed recreated, flecks on her blue irises were plain and disturbing, the healed acne scars of her facial skin, uncompromised. Her nudity exposed a strange asymmetry of the nipples on her large breasts. Her pelvis was too wide for beauty, and her sturdy legs ended in thick ankles. Her facial expression seemed unaware that anyone would look at her. He had captured the childishness of her figure, and an almost prepubescent softness of her face, but the overall impression was not that she was child – or nude. Rather, it showed the excessive time and passion of the artist to create such minutia.

“It's lewd,” her mother said. “It's like he licked every inch of that girl's skin.”

Amanda agreed, but said nothing. The adjacent paintings were half and three-quarter studio figures, smaller and less offensive. Then there were two outdoor poses in spring settings, one where Hester lay face up in grass with her hands behind her head; in the other, she squatted to pick up a flower.

Amanda moved and stopped in front of a life-size portrait of Hester sitting on a wooden bench in front of a piano – a quarter-turn view – her arms back, her left leg extended to the floor. Her right leg was bent at the knee with her foot on the bench, a suggestive glimpse of her privates nestled between pink thigh-flesh.

Amanda moaned; such detail seemed so unnecessary.

“I hate him,” her mother said. “He wanted her.”

Amanda gripped her mother's shoulders from the back and pushed her to standing.

"Forget him. Finish the baking," Amanda said. She still hoped the meticulous images would awe the patrons enough to ignore her father's obsession, which, Amanda was now convinced, was more lust than love.

"He's making a fool of himself. And he's your father," her mother said.

"They might be art, Mother."

"They're filthy," her mother said.

Amanda followed her mother into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, took a bowl and placed it in her mother's hands. "I've got work with Marty."

Amanda walked down the short hall to one of three office doors. She knocked.

Marty, the gallery owner, greeted her from behind his desk, but did not smile. "Ready?" he asked.

Amanda took a folder for documents from a leather briefcase and placed it on the desk. Marty glanced at each paper.

"Will this ruin his career?" Amanda asked as he read. "My mother thinks it's artistic suicide."

"I tried. I joked with him, said they looked like Mexican porn on velvet. He said I was a shitty agent."

"It's all profit for you, Marty."

"Who cares if they're immoral? They'll sell, Amanda. Go into private collections. Look at Balthus."

Marty moved out from behind his desk. He was bald and wore a pinstriped business suit and a white shirt open at the neck.

Together they went out the gallery side door and walked two blocks to a lawyer's office, which was up a flight of stairs above a woman's clothing store, and notarized the sales agreements.

"I'm going home," said Marty when they were back at the door. "Pick you up at the motel?"

"We'll dress here." They had two hours before the caterers and personnel arrived. More than three hours before the opening.

Amanda let herself into the gallery and went into the kitchen. She placed her briefcase on the floor. She called out to her mother, who did not answer. The smell of baking cookies forced memories of summer vacation days home from boarding school, her mother hosting her father's openings, and a joyful celebration in an outrageously expensive restaurant to celebrate her father's growing success.

She walked out, the door closing behind her.

"Mother!" she called.

Silence.

She walked to the gallery. Her mother sat in a wooden armchair in the empty expanse of the show space, her feet splayed before her, her arms draped over the sides, her head back with her eyes closed.

Amanda felt her mother's pulse.

"Go away," he mother moaned. Amanda turned on the lights. She gasped.

An open plastic bottle of Liquid-Plummer lay on its side in an opaque pool that corroded the varnish on the oak floors. Two brushes and a kitchen fork on a kitchen towel were nearby.

“My God, Mother. “

“It’s the stuff to unclog drains,” she said, her eyes still closed. “I got tired.”

Every Hester detail was scraped clean from the sink portrait.

“He’s beyond saving himself,” her mother said.

Amanda paused. Margaret had left the background of the painting meticulously preserved, accenting Ernest Goings’ talent for settings. The remaining nudes seemed even more out of place now. For minutes, Amanda did not move.

“That poor child.”

“We can’t judge,” Amanda said.

“We might keep him out of jail.”

Amanda scanned the remaining nudes. She had never felt about paintings. Feelings corroded a manager’s business acumen in the art world. But she knew what her mother felt. There was more than bad judgment on these canvasses. There was revelation.

Amanda bent over and handed a brush to her mother. “Start on the last three over there,” she said. “We’ll meet in the middle.”

Amanda found another paintbrush and a spatula in the kitchen, and two bottles of caustic under the sink. Back in the gallery, her broad brushstrokes dissolved paint on contact. She did not preserve settings.

They worked in silence for almost an hour, scraping off what remained of Hester until she was gone from every portrait. Margaret gasped when Marty came into the gallery. Amanda collected her tools and set them on a chair.

“Goddamn it,” Marty said, his face creased with lines, his eyes dark and threatening. “You’ve really fucked up.”

The odor of burnt cookies seeped into the gallery from the kitchen. Amanda suppressed a smile.

“Oh, dear . . .” Margaret sighed sarcastically. “The cookies.”

“Burnt to an inedible crisp . . .” Amanda said.

“What will the guests have to enjoy?” Margaret said.

“It’s a crime,” Marty said. He stood with his feet planted, the fingers in his clenched fists turning white.

“It’s a family matter,” Amanda said. “Back off.”

Technically, the paintings were Marty’s property during the sale.

“You’re going to put me in jail? Put Mother on the chain gang?”

“Insurance will be tricky, Amanda.”

“It’s an act of God.” Amanda laughed. True, Marty was not a pleasant man, overweight with his handsome features sliding away, but he worked hard with dependable honesty. She looked at him. He was frowning.

“I have expenses,” Marty said.

“You’ve made more than two million off Ernest Goings,” Amanda said.

“I’ve got my girls to educate.”

“Hang loose, Marty. I’ll cover your losses.”

Marty sighed and stared at the two women streaked with dissolving paint: one with a skinny but muscular body with a deformed leg and the hard face of a woman who knows pain, her brown eyes glinting with excitement; the other teetering on old age, but breathing fast and grinning with the broad innocence of a child. For years, he had disliked Ernest Goings and ignored the family whenever he could, but he felt no anger.

Amanda took her mother's hand to leave.

"The pans. My purse," her mother said.

"Get out of Boston," Marty said. "This has to be reported."

Amanda and Margaret went to the kitchen to collect their things, the double-hinged door closing behind them.

The doorbell rang persistently. Marty unlocked the gallery front door. Eunice stood in a green, cotton dress, printed with white and yellow daises, that buttoned down the front. One brown lace in her white running shoes had come untied. Next to her, Hester wore black jeans tight enough to stretch the buttonhole at the waist, and a too big, thrift-store white blouse with an Alice-in-Wonderland frilly trim. She teetered in silver stiletto-heeled pumps. Her ankles were swollen.

"We're closed," Marty said.

"This here is the model," Eunice said. "We can't do the regular time . . ."

"I'm sorry," Marty interrupted.

". . . our ride got to leave early."

Eunice wedged her way in through the door opening and dragged Hester behind her.

“We got our rights,” Eunice said.

Marty held out his arm to block them. Eunice pushed his arm away and after a slight hesitation he didn’t resist.

Eunice strode by and Hester wobbled, hurrying to keep up. They stopped in mid gallery.

Amanda came alone from the kitchen and Marty pointed to Eunice and Hester. Hester took small steps to stand alone in front of the portrait Margaret had mutilated first. She whimpered.

After more than a minute, Hester touched her forefinger to the edge of the hole in the canvas. Then, with a flat palm, she intently stroked the air where her image had been, as if she could wipe off the reality of the hole and restore the illusion. She choked and let her hand fall to her side.

“I was important to him,” Hester said.

Amanda cringed.

“I wasn’t just a picture,” Hester said. She sat on the floor, cross-legged. The waist button on her jeans had popped open. One shoe fell off and lay on its side, the heel angled up. Hester still stared at the hole where she had once been so meticulously rendered.

Amanda walked back to the kitchen. Margaret held her purse and her utensils.

“It was the child, wasn’t it?” Margaret said. “Was her mother with her?”

“She’s destroyed.”

Amanda led her out the side door to the car, and in half an hour they were driving directly to Margaret’s sister’s house in New Hampshire, arriving well after midnight to stay the night.

“I’ll send your things,” Amanda said to her mother the next morning.

“What about the house?”

“Don’t go back. I’ll come for you in a few weeks.”

“And Ernest?”

“He’ll probably press charges, Mother.”

Amanda drove straight to the Rockton office. She taped an “Out of Business” sign to the window. She secured valuables, mailed deposits, disconnected phones, paid bills. She went to the bank to certify a check for Marty’s commission. She closed business accounts, took her due, and transferred money for her mother’s private accounts. She had accepted a position as CFO of a commercial gallery in Oregon.

In her final hour in Rockton, Amanda placed all the documentation of Hester’s modeling and payments with promotional photos of the destroyed portraits, in protective sleeves, in a business envelope for mailing. She dialed Portland police.

“I’m reporting abuse of a minor.”

“You the victim?”

She faltered. “No,” she said. She took a deep breath. “I’m the daughter.”

“You got evidence?”

“Talk to the victim. I think she’s pregnant.”