

The small gallery was on the second floor, behind the auditorium. It would be closed tonight because they were expecting nearly two hundred guests, and Wynter's pictures were too special to risk damage by drunken revelers. But Selene unlocked the room just for Willie, telling her she had lots of time to enjoy the paintings. "I'll come get you half an hour before the party starts and help you get dressed," she said, giving Willie a quick kiss and closing the door behind her.

The framed oil paintings, each measuring 48 x 36 inches, were displayed beneath banks of museum lighting, and only the pictures themselves were lit, leaving the spaces between in dramatic shadow. The sole furnishings were twelve viewing benches placed around the gallery, three in front of each wall. The black leather benches stood in stark contrast to the white walls, and the only colors in the room were the dazzling tones in Wynter's art. There was literally nowhere else for the eye to go but deep into these intense pictures.

As she gazed at the first painting on the east wall, Willie tried to view it with an open mind, which wasn't easy. The picture had a small plaque beneath it bearing the title, *Bad Girls Go to Heaven, Good Girls Stay Home*. It showed a domme seated on a throne before a black curtain, holding two short riding crops crossed in front of her chest. She was wearing a white latex body suit with gossamer wings that stuck out from each shoulder, and her smile seemed at once angelic and menacing. It bore testimony to Wynter's skill as an artist that she could portray both those impressions in the same smile.

On the floor in front of the domme was a naked woman lying on her back, face turned toward the viewer, grimacing in pain as the mistress pressed the heel of a six-inch stiletto shoe into her navel. It took a couple of moments for Willie to recognize the face of the domme. *Oh, my God. That's Jill. David would totally freak.*

Ironically, this first painting was the most "ordinary" in the exhibit. Several others were blatantly pornographic, and one of the most shocking bore the meaningless title, *The Blessed Fleen*.

The scene depicted several women wearing filmy white gowns, pushing dildos into naked women's vaginas, mouths and rectums, in some cases more than one object at a time. Off to one side, two naked men sat on a couch, drinking something from earthenware bowls as greenish liquid dribbled down their chins, and two more women in translucent gowns knelt between their legs, performing oral sex on them. In the background was a long judicial bench at which sat three robed women, wearing regal headdresses, each with palms raised, as if sanctifying this profane event.

Despite the obscene themes, Willie had to admit that the paintings were masterful in their detail, their harmony of light, shadow and color. The human bodies and faces were gorgeous and blazing with fierce erotic energy. Wynter was clearly a superb artist,

even though her sensibility was utterly twisted. *What a sad way to waste such brilliant talent*, Willie thought.

But as she continued to view the pictures, something unexpected struck her. When she focused on the facial expressions of the people in these vulgar scenes, she began to see a quality that was almost romantic. She wouldn't call it love, but there was a tangible kindness in the faces of the "victimizers," as if these violations were not for the sadistic satisfaction of the dominant partners, but more a tender gift to the submissives. The orgiastic sex wasn't turning Willie on, but it didn't repulse her either. Selene's rum punch was definitely affecting her, though, because she was feeling giddy and the room seemed to be getting warmer.

As she moved to the next wall, Willie saw a series of paintings quite different from the last group. The first was actually rather sweet. It showed a nude female couple—a blonde and a dusky-skinned girl, her hair a mass of tumbling black ringlets—sitting on a bench in a forest glade, embracing and kissing fervently. There was nothing even remotely crude in it, rather there was a kind of "lost-in-each-other" passion that reminded Willie of Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss*—except, of course, that this was a female couple.

*Now that's more my speed*, she thought. *These girls are in love.*

But the next picture undid all the tenderness in the previous one. This was a twilight scene in which a group of gowned, flower-garlanded girls were seated at a picnic table in an orchard feasting on the flesh of another group of girls who were the main course in this gory banquet. With a shudder, Willie recognized the blonde from the "kiss" painting, now consuming the left arm of her dusky-skinned lover. The most unsettling thing was that the girls being eaten alive didn't seem to mind, laughing and talking with the girls who were in the process of devouring them.

Above the table, winged pixies flitted about, filling wine glasses or hand-feeding little dainties to the girls who were the main course of this "feast." The table was brightly lit by lanterns that resembled fruits, which hung in multicolored clusters from trees whose crowns formed a canopy above the scene. It was like the Mad Hatter's Tea Party seen through the eye of a voluptuous cannibal. Willie knew she should be disgusted but found herself giggling instead.

The first painting on the north wall offered yet another drastic change in subject, showing an orchard filled with fruit trees beneath a green sky and two crescent moons. In the foreground, one of the trees appeared to be blighted, and an old woman with white hair knelt beside it, gnarled hands covering her face as she wept bitterly. A young woman who could have been her granddaughter knelt beside her, trying to comfort the crone.

Why a dying tree should cause the old woman such grief, Willie couldn't guess, but something about it was incomparably sad, and her eyes began to fill with tears. She'd had that rum punch over half an hour ago but seemed to be getting drunker by the minute.

As odd as this collection was, the final two pictures were the strangest yet, and she stared at the first in bewilderment trying to understand what she was seeing. It was entitled *The Nursery* and showed a stand of sapling trees at the center of which stood the figure of a slim, naked man, no more than twenty, with a mass of frizzy black hair, whose lower torso was a tree trunk with roots delving deep into the earth. The change from human skin to bark was gradual and very natural-looking, and a small branch jutted from his groin like an erect penis, with a spray of tiny white blossoms shooting from its tip like semen.

Standing beside the tree-man were two young women who seemed to be twins, and they were each licking one side of his serene face. In the background was a bed of California poppies, their orange essence brilliant, almost insolent against the lush green grass and a pale green sky. The colors were intense, alive and electric, like something out of a dream or a fairy tale picture book. Willie felt a flash of déjà vu as she took in the scene, but the sensation passed quickly.

The last painting, entitled *Midwives*, was clearly related to the previous one, but it was even more astonishing. This scene was set inside what appeared to be a Greek temple, through whose rear pillars one could see a night sky—a sky filled with bright stars and two full moons, one of which was either larger or closer than the other.

There were five women inside the temple, and the four who were standing were clothed in the same translucent gowns that seemed so common in these paintings. The fifth woman—a naked redhead—was reclining on a couch, her splendid upper body raised just far enough for the viewer to see her face, which held an expression that Willie could only think of as transcendent joy. The entire scene was like some classical Greek set piece, though it was totally post-modern in its bizarre, fetishistic content.

Behind the reclining redhead, another woman stood rubbing the girl's temples, as if trying to relieve her of a headache. The standing woman—a tall brunette with a sharp nose and full lips—was singing or chanting, and again, Jill seemed to be the model.

The chest of the redhead on the couch was covered with the tattoo of a tree, something like the one Selene had, only this illustration was incomplete. The tree's crown began just below the redhead's neck and covered most of her upper chest and shoulders, before the trunk began its descent between her breasts and down toward her belly, where it came to a sudden, jagged halt just above her navel. It was obvious that the tattoo was unfinished, because at the redhead's right stood a brunette who was

Wynter herself, holding a tattooing needle in her left hand, poised to complete the missing portion of the image.

But it was the bottom of the redhead's body that was most startling. The woman's legs were raised, knees up and spread wide in the classic position of childbirth. She was clearly not pregnant, but the suggestion of a woman about to give birth was unmistakable.

The physical transformation began midway down her thighs. Like the young man in the previous painting, her legs were turning into tree trunks, the smooth skin becoming gradually more mottled as it dipped toward her knees, which had taken on the shape of wooden boles, brown and gnarled as an oak.

Her calves were already fully altered, the rough-looking bark sprouting an array of slender shoots, at whose tips pale-green buds were opening. What should have been lovely ankles and delicate feet had become thick, woody clumps, and what had formerly been toes were now long roots, which were being shepherded into a large pot of soil by a small woman with a shaved head, who was helping guide this remarkable transformation.

As if all of this were not strange enough, another woman was leaning in from the left, her small breasts barely visible through her flimsy gown. She was bent over the reclining redhead, a long strand of saliva trailing down from her mouth directly onto the redhead's sex, where the pinky of the spitting woman's right hand was stimulating the "tree-woman's" clitoris. Willie stared at the astonishing scene for several minutes, trying to understand it, wondering if there was even anything there to understand.

Suddenly she felt a rush of fear. Would this tree-woman still have lungs when these "midwives" were done with her? And if her lungs also turned to wood, how would she breathe? Willie felt a tightening in her chest and recognized the start of a panic attack, the kind she would have when Harry was about to burn her with a cigarette.

The room began to spin and Willie swayed unsteadily, staggering over to one of the benches where she sat and tried to regain her composure. She felt clammy, sick to her stomach, and a loud pulse was hammering in her ears, so she lay down on the bench and closed her eyes, hoping Selene would come for her soon.