

Elusion

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SAMPLE

Chapter I

Louise Christy's esoteric specialty—exhibiting art—was not the most lucrative field she could have entered. Nor had her skills ever been in great demand. Of that she had been forewarned. Her family had raised strenuous objections at the time, advising her to invest her energy, her vivacity, her life in something more realistic, reminding her that she had a living to make for herself.

As predicted, her work had not been an instant success. It hadn't been any kind of success. She did get very good at following tenuous leads while trying to rouse the interest of rich, philanthropic institutions she thought should want to sponsor her work. They didn't. Her secret dream along the way was to discover huge pockets of privately-owned art, approach the owners, approach the institutions, and then design the magic connection—the exhibition—that would set all those pieces of never-known or forgotten art in the limelight to enrapture the public imagination.

Because she was passionate about her work, lack of encouragement never fazed her. She kept on, undaunted, sparkling, intense, optimistic. But none of that ever made any difference either. The only service would-be clients were interested in, now and again, was her ability to acquire for them single pieces of art. From which she always earned a handsome commission, which fueled her fires for the next round of unlikely leads and hopeless follow-ups.

She was stubborn and persistent and, lo and behold, her fortunes changed. It happened all at once. The board of a newly formed corporate group discovered her and under its patronage, within twelve months, she had opened galleries in eight different states across the country, and there was talk of Singapore. Hong Kong had

been mentioned. It was a mad, opulent whirl and she, a golden woman with an enormous salary and use of the corporate jet, had become its center and motivating force. She was whisked from Washington D.C. to Utah, from Illinois to Montana while sketching designs, poring over floor plans, and reviewing lists of possible art contributors and their collections. For weeks at a time every minute of her day was booked and the pressure to perform was on. She loved it. On her first day after arriving in New Mexico in November, just one year into her heady new life, she was told the project was cancelled. She was cancelled.

“Cancelled?” she asked the tall, blond representative of the corporate amalgamation that financed the projects.

“Stopped,” was his curt reply. He sat crouched in the back seat of the taxi, squinting up at her. His proposal to pick her up for brunch before driving to the new gallery site had been a ploy. She knew that now, and he knew she knew. He had wanted to break the news to her gently, in the most pleasant circumstance he could think of, brunch, her favorite meal. But his own nervousness, his outrage, had not permitted him to wait. The sight of her standing there on the curb, sparkling and neat, punctual as clockwork, talented goddess that she was, waiting for a damned fool like him to come racing up to her in that wreck of a taxi, had made his heart bleed for her. And for the damned fool. He had shot out with the news as soon as he had thrown open the taxi door. Now he collapsed back against the seat, his sulky gaze boring into the grimy upholstery in front of him, his lips working silently on their own. There was no reason for her to crawl into that taxi beside him. She knew that. He knew it. So it would be goodbye. Drawing out one long leg, he set his foot in the street where it began pumping rapidly alongside the cold, glittering curb. What did he have to offer her? What was he willing to give up for her, really? Nothing. On both counts.

“Stopped?” she brought him back to the unpleasant present.

“On hold,” he compromised somewhat coolly.

“For how long?”

Pause. “We don’t know.”

“*Who* doesn’t know?”

He smiled sourly. “*I* don’t know. They want out, that’s all. Art, the public, you, me, don’t matter anymore. You were in a windfall game, Louise. And, well, you’ve been dropped. *Art* has been

dropped. For a while. Sorry.” He tried to smile again, but only managed a miserable smirk.

“But it’s been going so well. Beautifully. And for investors. *I* happen to know there are plenty—”

A spasm of impatience shuddered through him. “Excuse me! Did I say that wrong? How you do and what you do doesn’t matter. These huge budgets have nothing to do with philanthropy.” He stared wisely, if coldly, into the taxi upholstery, his light eyebrows raised. “It has nothing to do with art.” He shook his head again slowly, his eyes screwed up. “We can make them look good, though. Not to forget. We can make them look damn good. Have done. And they liked it.”

“And? If we do?”

The anxious-looking man shrugged. “We started making them look bad. *You* did. They’ve gotten cranky. They want their money back. Look at me. Cool me. I’m a wreck. The project’s been cancelled. You’re out for a while.”

“But what about Montana?” Montana had been her most recent show and her most successful. Its vernissage—her vernissage, had received admiring reviews in city, state, and one London newspaper. It had been a sensation.

“Oh, Montana,” he said dryly and she stiffened. “The only problem was the wrong critics loved it. You wooed the radicals with that one. Investors did not like having English labor call it a clever insinuation of bread-and-salt values rejuvenating the spirit of the American worker, or whatever the hell they said.”

“I thought it was inspiring,” she returned, offended. The most enchanting things had been said about that show. And she, personally, was for bread-and-salt values.

“It was just a little too conservative, Louise. They’ve all been just a tad . . . too conservative.”

“You just said I wooed the radicals.”

“Bread-and-salt values are out! Old! Conservative! Bad press! No damn good! You made our corporate biddies look like socialists!” he shouted, then winced and threw himself back against the seat. “They don’t like it. That’s not hard to understand, is it?”

“I thought you just said what I did didn’t matter.”

“And you’re wrong!” he contradicted himself. “A particular merger may or may not come off. An enormous one and not

friendly. They don't want to look like labor-deluded liberals, but clear-sighted, forward-looking, stable but daring."

"Maybe they should tell me that ahead of time," she pointed out tartly. "I have nothing against working for the right audience."

"Maybe you should have found out about that yourself ahead of time," he carped.

"I had absolutely no indication that there was anything to find out about!" she defended herself.

"You've lost your touch!" he shrieked.

"You can't tell me that! Just because a bunch of reviewers came up with a bunch of reviews that gave them the wrong kind of press. So the political angle was wrong! I understand that, but I was giving them exactly what I understood they wanted—"

"And you were wrong!"

"—and doing it very well!" she retorted, incensed by his reproach.

"It's just no good anymore! Why is it no good anymore? Why? Why?" He cut himself off. He was ranting.

She stood at the curb, rigid, white-faced, eyes wide and dark and staring at him in disbelief. He didn't believe it himself, but things were spinning away from him. She was.

I'm not out for a while, she thought, I'm out for good. Her shrugged shoulders began to ache from holding her arms stiff and straight in the cool morning breeze. It was her unarmed toy soldier pose. She did not assume it; it assumed her whenever she found herself confronted with the unpleasant but unavoidable, like an early morning shower before a long trip when there's no hot water or being told her livelihood had been cut off. "Couldn't you have told me all this on the phone?" she asked frowning.

He frowned back, then tried to smile, but it surfaced as another smirk. "But we always have such interesting face time."

She grunted.

Selfish and egotistical, he had wanted to see her again, to persuade her, to reassure her, and instead he had come out with all that, making it far worse than it had to be. The breeze was cool on his stockinged ankle. He tried again to explain calmly that she was by no means unemployed; that she could stay on at her last gallery, the Montana one as manager and . . . clerk. That she could do. That they would let her do. No problem there, no cancellations, no

stoppages, no holds. No cranky people canceling funds on her. She could take the five hundred a week for as long as she wanted, all expenses paid. He would be in Montana regularly, stop by, see how she was doing, let her know—he interrupted his own idle stream of half-sentences:

“Not interested, I guess? They can all go to that other place, that’s what you’re thinking? And I expect . . . you’re going to leave?” He turned his face up, but couldn’t manage to look directly at her because he didn’t know if it was for the last time.

Pressing her arms flat against her sides, she stared down at the fair-skinned man she felt she knew so well, delicate yet tough, sensitive but full of irritatingly fierce and senseless conviction, then her thoughts fixed clearly on his fiercely determined red-haired wife and their two blond, fair-skinned children. Her eyes narrowed. She straightened her shoulders slowly, lifted her arms once, then pressed them back down to her sides, the soldier, unarmed, at attention. “I expect I am.” As the taxi pulled away, he twisted to look through the back window and held up a hand to her. She returned his salute, and the two were parted.

Chapter 2

When Louise called her brother to tell him the upsetting news, she intimated that the demand for art galleries had suddenly and severely diminished.

“What about San Diego?” Steve Christy countered. San Diego had been the next city on Louise’s itinerary after Albuquerque.

“What about it?” she asked a trifle impatient. Her restless mind was still busy gathering in the consequences of the catastrophic news. She had made so much money at that job. She had *spent* so much money. She? Mr. Grieve had certainly been instrumental in that regard, but the bills—her bills—would outlive the job by years. And the house in Portugal? The thought of Portugal charged her with momentary panic.

“Are they going ahead with it?” Steve’s question, uttered so softly and so low it sounded hoarse, jolted Louise unpleasantly from painful memories to an even more painful present. She didn’t know if they were going ahead with the project or not; if everything was on hold and if she was no longer there, how could they?

“I’d check that out,” Steve responded, unpleasantly surprising her yet again, but added, “The shop in the barn is being vacated.”

“Which shop?”

“*Your* shop, for Christ’s sake.” He laughed rustily. “The shop you got mad at me for designing, then got mad at me for renting out. The silo shop.”

“You’re joking! How could anyone let that place go? It’s the most enchanted space on earth. People don’t age in there. The light those magnificent windows cast is magic. You never believed me, but it’s true. The impenetrable sundial. It would have made the most beautiful apartment.”

“No one could—or even should have paid as much as I needed for it once I got it finished.”

“It’s exactly what you wanted, isn’t it? The no-compromise place.”

“Yeah. Just the way I wanted. For once in my life. Not sure it was worth it, though. It was making me goofy.”

“It makes a perfect shop. You don’t have to sell anything. People will come in just to be in that fantastic light. It’s like being inside a work of art. Public welcome,” she mused.

There was a pause. “Want me to hold it for you?”

“I don’t see how I could just walk in and take it,” Louise murmured worriedly. At this juncture in her life, she wasn’t sure she wanted to become indebted to her brother, too, and as her finances stood at the moment, she didn’t know how she’d be able to afford the shop otherwise. “How long can you hold it?”

“Maybe till you come?”

“Oh, Steve . . .”

“You don’t mind if I top your outrageous news, do you?” came his soft non sequitur.

“What?” she asked cautiously. She wasn’t exactly prepared to hear more outrageous news.

“Esther has moved out.”

Although Louise had disliked her brother’s wife for years without justification, if subtle, constant snobbery is insufficient grounds for distinct aversion, the announcement brought her down like lead. “What for?”

“She’s left me.” His voice was as soft as ever, but suddenly she heard everything that patterned its underside. Compassion welled up in her, and anxiety. Her brother had a drinking problem. She knew it. Esther knew it. She wasn’t sure if anyone else knew it. With such a gentle creature as her brother, drinking did nothing but lower him down into some terrible, still bitterness she could not fathom.

He went on: “Mom was actually in the intensive care unit—ohh,” at Louise’s exclamation. “At that age, they put everyone in the intensive care unit. If you’re over seventy, it’s the intensive care unit for you. Just a precaution.”

“What was the matter with her?”

“She was just upset about Esther.”

“What was the *matter* with her?”

“Her right thigh felt funny when she woke up one morning, she said. Tingly.”

“Her right thigh?” she asked puzzled.

“Side. Her right *side*.”

“Steve. That’s a stroke.”

“Yes. They said she had a mild—very mild stroke.”

“No one said anything to me.”

“I’m telling you now. It didn’t happen so long ago, and it was better for her to be out of the intensive care unit before I told you. And, well, I couldn’t reach you. You’ve been busy.”

“Oh, haven’t I been. Not a minute to spare. Booked for weeks at a time. A busy, busy lady.” Her voice was tight with irony. “How long was she in there?”

“A week. She’s out now. Results from all the tests were excellent. She’s all right. But her right side still feels funny, tingly, she says.”

Within the hour, Louise had arranged her flight, packed, and removed her light traces from the dust of the vast Southwest.

Chapter 3

It was *the* shop in the city's most fashionable shopping area: Walnut street of Shadyside, and Louise had always dreamed of possessing that space to transform it into the boutique of her dreams, a perfume shop, stocking all the fragrances ever detected, collected, and bottled by humankind. It had never been possible before. The space had never been available before, and she could have no more afforded it then as she actually could now. It's just that in the ensuing years she had gained great experience in getting things financed. Like houses in Portugal. And Steve had made concessions. He wanted her back.

Steve had designed the space with beatniks in mind, rich beatniks; an unusual, high-class dwelling for rich beatniks, 'if we can find any,' he had remarked not without concern. And he hadn't been able to, except himself, and even he couldn't afford it. So the beatest abode in the city was transformed into the most beautiful shop in the city, one Louise, as a twenty-eight-year-old woman, fell fiercely in love with.

The bizarre charm of the building came from the old, but beautiful parts Steve had built into it, parts salvaged from such unlikely sites as spring houses on abandoned farms, ruined railway stations, and bombed-out European public toilets. The main shop floor was two stories high. Its silo-like front wall faced both streets of a moderately busy intersection. The gleaming curve of the inner surface was covered with resurrected tiles, not all the same color, not all the same shape, not all the same size. Steve had picked them up over the years from different places, on different trips, from different Dutch tile manufacturers, and invested this single wall with them all, the fruit of a passionate collection which had lasted over a

decade. At the time Louse had been angry with him. He was prostituting himself to give up his precious collection to a project, to a building to be rented out to just anyone at all. But the effect was subtly fantastic. The barely perceptible variety and interplay of colors and shapes awoke in the room a murky consciousness, and Louise, in falling in love with it, became aware that her brother's quirky design sense might be genius.

But Steve had not finished. To spark the luster of the tiles, he set into the wall at odd places completely mismatched panels of stained glass. The filtered light floated down into the shop from angles that slowly changed with the sweep of the sun. To one side, a circular staircase rose up to communicate with a sizeable gallery whose shadowy spaces overlooked the main floor through a fine, but ferocious-looking wrought-iron grillwork, its long, thin points reaching almost to the vaulted ceiling. Set high along the gallery's back wall, an opposing row of tiny, mismatched windows formed a kaleidoscopic crown which played through the grillwork to trace fantastic shadows across the silo wall in late afternoon. This was Louise's favorite creature, the impenetrable sundial, from which she could make of time—in the late afternoon—what she wished.



As promised, *Ms Christy's* occupied the magical space as Louise knew it was meant to be occupied. This was important because it was not really perfume she was selling. She was selling secret potions, seductive mixtures, atmosphere, and magic—a woman's magic. But it could only be done if the women themselves participated. Without that participation, it was only retail sales and that did not interest Louise. Yet Louise knew she couldn't expect a woman to get actively involved in a process unfamiliar to her. She had to be coaxed into it, wooed by the proper atmosphere, shown how things could be if she gave herself over to seeking her identity from all of the fragrances Louise offered and, in doing so, discover the power of her own individual magic. That was the gentle process Louise wanted to touch off, but it called for finesse. By her shrewd employment of a few carefully chosen, bewitching shop clerks, Louise felt she had added the final touch. The coup had been hiring a serene young beauty named Toko, and with her completely unlooked-for, promising new life so easily realized, Louise's full lips

were always parted in an involuntary smile, her dark eyes glowed as she surveyed her new world. Until her well-intentioned brother cast a shadow on it all.

On an overcast day in March, Louise was on her slow way to brunch when she bumped into Steve, his prematurely snow-white hair fluffed by the wind, his painfully pale blue eyes watering from the cold. It had become a charming, commonplace occurrence for brother and sister to bump into each other on some neighborhood street, each going his own way, each with his own business foremost in mind. Steve Christy, whose business had to do with the buildings he owned, was renovating, or building in the area, could be seen walking back and forth almost every day of the week carrying unusually shaped packages: light fixtures, clothing racks, odd pieces of plumbing, andirons for a fireplace. Louise first ventured out towards midmorning, when it was her habit to gently enter the world by brunching in the corner booth of a near-by café. Only afterwards did she make her appearance in the perfume shop. With the discovery of the sales wizard, Toko, she found that her presence in the shop during what were for her painful morning hours was not necessary.

After the ‘oh!’s and a brief, jesting spring away from each other, the two were soon deeply engaged in conversation, oblivious to passers-by, to the tug of the raw breezes at their collars and cuffs, to the traffic that sounded around them. Steve seemed worried.

“Things are going well, Louise? With the shop, I mean.”

“I know what you mean!” she chuckled. “Very well. Too well!”

His forehead crinkled. “Why do you say that?”

“Don’t take me so seriously, Mís-ter Chrís-ty!” She reproached him, but her face lit up. “I just can’t believe it! No drag start-up time. Perfect location. Perfect building. Interested people with money to spend. A dream come true. Why didn’t you talk me into this ages ago?”

Instead of sharing in her good humor, he looked away, his face severe, his eyes smarting from the wind.

“Do you have a cold?” she asked, perplexed.

“I’m an ass,” he answered. Taking her by the arm, he drew her down the side street and into the alley that ran its lumpy way thirty yards behind the slick business thoroughfare. He looked unfriendly and thoroughly chilled. “I’m an ass and you know it, so I’ll ask my

stupid question: why are things going so well? Do you have any idea?"

Louise stood back from him shaking her head uncomprehendingly, the light still in her eyes. "Is it that unusual? For the shop? For the area? This is an excellent area." She looked around her. "Well, maybe not the alley, but over *yonder*. There's no better place for small business owners. *Is there?*"

"Just answer my question."

"What's the matter with you? It's be-*cause* I'm selling so much *per-fume* . . . and soap . . . and *bath* sponges . . . and *linge-rie* . . ." Her tone became light-hearted, amused, mercurial. "And silver bedroom slippers! And—" She laughed. "Herb teas. Can you believe it?"

"You're selling that much, are you?"

"Absolutely. Steve. I'm getting orders from all over the country—already! For the Goutal perfumes. Why are you asking me all this?"

"Just curious. And . . . who works for you?"

"The three shop girls you know about."

"That reddish-haired girl—"

Louise's voice softened. "She's gorgeous, isn't she? She—Toko—that's the fashion plate. What a blessing that girl is! Despite the absolutely stunning way she looks, she's very serious, very competent. For fashion and design she has real talent, I would say. She's studying marketing and fashion now, knows exactly what she wants to do, even has plans for Ms Christy's. It would interest you, Steve. She's talking about an art café. You may want to see her sketches some time. They are really good. I'm quite lucky that she has so much faith in *me*. It almost makes me nervous. She's an extraordinary girl with extraordinary ideas, perfect for the fashion industry. She won't be in Pittsburgh long, that one."

"When do you make your greatest turnover?" His voice was still soft, but probing.

"Steve! You make it sound improper."

"I'm asking seriously. Do you know? When do you get most of your business?" His cold eyes finally stubbed out her light-heartedness. Her cheery mood vanished along with the glow from her face. The smile lines receded from her cheeks and eyes, and her expression, although not troubled, grew serious. Another complex

set of lines became visible, and she suddenly looked older, a trifle leathery.

“No. I can’t really say. I do know that Toko—the reddish-haired girl, makes the most sales. That’s in the morning.”

“Before you come in.”

“She’s there . . . before . . . I come in. Steve, I hope that’s not a criticism. I’m never going to be there all the time! And I trust those girls. I insist you tell me why you’re asking me all this. Are you saying something is not right? You can’t possibly want to insinuate that Toko’s stealing. You seem to be complaining that she’s taking in too much, not too little.”

Steve’s eyes wrinkled and grew small as he looked away from her to the midmorning light leaking down from the clouded March sky. The blackened, coarse shapes of the store backs contrasted in an ugly way with the smooth face and sublime light of Walnut street. “Nothing serious. Nothing serious.”

“Steve, tell me.”

“I’m an ass.”

“What does that make me, then?” she returned out of patience.

Her provocation brought him to the point. “Steve J was drawing the shop for a project last week.” Steve J., his son, was studying architecture and generally following in his father’s professional footsteps, but the fifteen-year-old showed promise, great promise. They all believed he was gifted and so did the universities offering him full scholarships immediately, although he had not yet finished high school. “He spent some time sitting and drawing the building. He’s thorough. He became so fascinated by what he saw that he spent the rest of the morning there. Until you came.”

“I saw him. He does marvelous things.”

“He saw marvelous things. Doesn’t seem to be able to finish the drawing, though. He keeps going back there.”

Louise laughed. “Steve, what is it?”

“It’s your shop clerk.”

“Toko,” Louise affirmed impatiently.

“Steve J keeps going back, but he doesn’t seem to be able to finish the project, and hasn’t started any others. That must be quite a girl.”

“She is.” In the next moment, the color drained from her face as Steve held out to her a sketch of the shop.

“That’s what Steve J has produced so far. I’m not sure the girl is busy selling perfume. She may have something much more profitable in those skimpy drawers of hers. That’s what Steve J saw, anyway. Go by some morning and loiter about. See what you see.”

Louise stared at him, then looked away. It was happening all over again: her livelihood was being threatened because she was exhibiting the wrong kind of art. But she couldn’t face Steve’s awful challenge either. “You can’t think I would sneak around spying on her. Just waiting to . . . to see . . . whatever . . . That’s out of the question.”

“Then ask her.”

“That’s out of the question as well!”

Steve said little more about it, knew little more about it, as his son would say little more about it regardless of his father’s gentle, coaxing inquiries. Steve intended for Louise to take the tête-à-tête as a word to the wise: Louise Christy should do a little investigating to make sure her shop was not becoming a house of something other than what she intended, which would ruin her reputation in that area of the city, not to mention her financial standing.