

The Fine Art of Lying

*A Darkly Addictive Psychological Thriller
About Wealth, Obsession, Betrayal, and the
Dangerous Price of Becoming Someone Else*

Celeste Sinclair

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Prologue

The Woman in the Photograph

By midnight, the champagne had stopped tasting like champagne.

It tasted expensive, cold, and vaguely metallic, like everything else inside the Ashcroft Museum that evening.

The winter gala had begun with the kind of elegance Manhattan congratulated itself for. Black town cars lined East Seventy-Second Street beneath strings of white lights wrapped around bare trees. Women stepped onto the sidewalk in couture gowns and long wool coats while photographers called their names into the freezing December air. Men with silver hair and generational wealth stood beneath the museum's limestone entrance smiling with the polished confidence of people accustomed to being admired.

Inside, the museum glowed gold.

Music drifted softly through the marble halls. Waiters carried crystal trays filled with champagne coupes and caviar tartlets no one ever finished eating. Contemporary string arrangements floated through the galleries while wealthy donors discussed philanthropy, politics, market forecasts, and art they privately believed other people were too unintelligent to understand.

Everything shimmered.

The jewels.

The polished floors.

The laughter.

The lies.

Especially the lies.

Clara Holloway stood near the west gallery entrance with one gloved hand curled around a champagne glass, watching a woman she did not recognize move slowly through the room.

The woman wore black silk.

Not fashionable black. Not performative black. Real black. The kind that absorbed light instead of reflecting it.

She was beautiful in a way that made people instinctively quieter around her. Dark hair gathered loosely at the base of her neck. Pale skin. Sharp cheekbones. No jewelry except a thin gold watch resting against one wrist.

Several guests turned discreetly to watch her pass.

Clara noticed because she had spent years studying the way wealthy people looked at one another. Admiration among Manhattan's elite rarely appeared as warmth. It appeared as calculation.

Who was she?

Who invited her?

How much money did she have?

Did she belong here?

The woman moved toward the private exhibition wing without speaking to anyone.

Clara frowned slightly.

The west gallery had been closed to guests all evening.

At the far end of the room, Vivienne Ashcroft stood beneath a massive oil portrait speaking to museum trustees with one elegant hand wrapped around the stem of a wineglass. Even from across the gallery, she looked perfectly composed. Silver hair. Ivory silk gown. Diamond earrings that caught the light each time she tilted her head.

Nothing escaped Vivienne.

And yet her attention had shifted.

Briefly.

Toward the woman in black.

Only for a second.

But Clara noticed.

“Who is that?” she asked quietly.

Julian glanced up from his conversation beside her. “Who?”

“The woman near the west corridor.”

By the time he turned, the woman had already disappeared behind the velvet partition leading toward the private galleries.

Julian barely looked interested. “Probably another donor.”

“No,” Clara said softly. “People know the donors.”

Julian smiled faintly before adjusting his cufflinks. “You notice too much.”

It was something he told her often.

Sometimes affectionately.

Sometimes not.

Across the museum, laughter swelled beneath the vaulted ceilings while cameras flashed near the main staircase. Somewhere nearby, a violinist transitioned into a slower arrangement that sounded almost mournful beneath the noise of the crowd.

Clara looked again toward the west wing.

The velvet partition hung still.

Something unsettled her suddenly, though she could not have explained why.

Perhaps it was the woman herself.

Or perhaps it was the strange feeling that she had seen her before.

Not recently.

Not clearly.

But somewhere.

A memory moved at the edge of Clara's mind like a figure crossing fog.

Before she could reach it, Vivienne Ashcroft appeared beside her.

"You look pale, darling."

Vivienne's voice carried the effortless smoothness of old money. Nothing rushed her. Nothing surprised her. She spoke the way certain women wore perfume. Subtly and with intention.

"I'm fine," Clara replied.

Vivienne studied her face for a moment too long.

Then she smiled.

"You should learn to relax at these things," she said. "Everyone here is pretending. That's what makes society tolerable."

Julian laughed softly beside them.

Clara forced herself to smile.

But she noticed something unusual then.

Vivienne's attention drifted briefly toward the west corridor.

And for the first time that evening, the older woman looked uneasy.

Not frightened.

Worse.

Prepared.

An hour later, the body was discovered.

The screaming began somewhere beyond the private exhibition rooms.

At first the sound barely registered against the music and conversation. A sharp noise. A dropped tray perhaps. Then another scream followed, louder this time, jagged enough to split through the glamour of the evening.

Everything changed almost instantly.

Music stopped.

Conversations collapsed mid-sentence.

Guests turned sharply toward the west wing as security rushed past the galleries.

Clara felt Julian's hand close around her wrist.

“Stay here.”

But she was already moving.

People crowded near the velvet partition leading into the restricted corridor. Someone shouted for the police. Another voice demanded everyone step back. Crystal shattered somewhere behind her.

Then Clara saw the blood.

Only a small amount at first.

A dark stain cutting across pale marble beneath the gallery lights.

The room beyond looked frozen in time.

Paintings lined the walls beneath controlled museum lighting. Half-empty champagne glasses still rested on a side table near the entrance. A projector hummed quietly against one wall beside a

series of photographs prepared for the evening's private unveiling.

And at the center of the room, beneath an enormous gilt-framed portrait, lay the woman in black.

Dead.

Her body rested awkwardly against the marble floor, one arm bent beneath her. Dark hair spread across the ground beside her face. A thin trail of blood disappeared beneath the collar of her dress.

Several guests gasped behind Clara.

Others stared silently.

Because even in death, the woman remained beautiful.

One of the security guards muttered something about the doors.

Locked from the inside.

No sign of forced entry.

No visible weapon.

The museum director stood near the doorway looking physically ill.

Julian appeared beside Clara again. This time his grip tightened harder against her arm.

"Do not say anything," he whispered.

Clara turned toward him slowly.

"What?"

But Julian's expression had changed.

Not shock.

Recognition.

Across the room, Vivienne Ashcroft stood perfectly still beneath the gallery lights, her face unreadable.

Then Clara noticed something else.

On the far wall behind the dead woman, the projector had frozen mid-slide during the chaos. A black-and-white photograph remained illuminated against the screen.

At first glance, it looked harmless.

A candid image from years earlier.

Venice, perhaps.

A private gathering.

Elegant people standing together beside a canal at night.

But the longer Clara stared at it, the colder she became.

Because among the figures inside the photograph stood the dead woman.

And beside her stood Julian.

Younger.

Smiling.

One arm resting intimately against her waist.

Clara's breath caught.

But that was not the worst part.

The worst part was that Julian had once sworn to Clara he had never met her before in his life.

Part I
Becoming Someone Else

Chapter 1

The Kind of Woman People Notice

The first lie Clara told that morning was small enough to survive unnoticed.

“I’m almost finished with the manuscript,” she said.

She said it while standing barefoot in the kitchen of their apartment on West End Avenue, watching rain slide slowly down the windows overlooking the gray February street below. Julian sat at the marble island reading financial headlines on his tablet while untouched coffee cooled beside him.

He did not look up immediately.

“That’s good,” he said after a moment.

Not curious.

Not skeptical.

Just politely relieved to hear progress attached to something he had long stopped believing in.

Clara leaned against the counter, holding her mug with both hands. She hated how carefully she monitored his reactions these days. Tiny shifts in tone had begun to matter more than words themselves.

She had once imagined marriage would feel intimate. Instead it often felt like sharing space with someone who remained slightly out of reach no matter how many years passed between you.

Julian finally glanced up.

“You still meeting Elise this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“At the museum?”

She nodded.

“Good.” He folded the tablet neatly against the countertop. “You should get out more.”

The comment landed harder than he intended.

Or perhaps exactly as intended.

Clara smiled faintly to disguise the sting. “I leave the apartment.”

“You know what I mean.”

She did.

The silence that followed settled heavily between them.

Rain tapped softly against the windows while somewhere below, a car horn echoed through traffic. The city sounded distant from thirty floors above the street, softened by height and money.

Everything in the apartment looked expensive without appearing personal.

Cream-colored furniture.

Abstract paintings selected by consultants.

Shelves filled with art books Julian never opened.

Fresh white orchids replaced every Monday by the same florist.

Nothing reflected Clara except the study at the end of the hallway where unfinished research papers sat stacked beside old dissertation notes she had not touched in months.

Maybe years, if she was being honest.

Julian rose from his chair and crossed toward her. He kissed her forehead absentmindedly while fastening the buttons of his coat.

“You worry too much,” he said quietly.

Clara forced another smile.

Then he left.

The apartment became silent in the peculiar way wealthy apartments often did. Thick walls erased the noise of neighboring lives. No televisions. No shouting. No evidence that other people existed nearby.

Only stillness.

Clara stood alone in the kitchen for a long time after the door closed.

At thirty-three, she had imagined herself becoming someone entirely different from the woman she now saw reflected in dark windows and elevator mirrors.

When she first arrived in New York at twenty-four, she believed intelligence alone would save her.

That was the arrogance of gifted women from small towns.

You grow up praised for being exceptional, only to arrive in Manhattan and discover the city is crowded with exceptional people. Beautiful people. Wealthy people. Better connected people. Women younger than you with trust funds and Paris internships and family names that opened doors before they even spoke.

By twenty-eight, Clara had still believed she would finish her doctorate.

By thirty, she had believed marriage might quiet the low, constant panic inside her.

By thirty-three, she had become skilled at pretending she was not disappointed by her own life.

That, more than anything else, exhausted her.

She carried her coffee into the study and opened her laptop.

The unfinished dissertation stared back at her from the screen.

Women in Shadow: Female Portraiture and Erasure in Prewar European Art.

The title sounded impressive enough to strangers.

The reality was less glamorous.

Five abandoned chapters.

Hundreds of research notes.

A career suspended so long it had begun decaying quietly beneath the surface.

Clara scrolled through old drafts while trying not to calculate how many years of work sat fossilized inside folders no one would ever read.

At noon, her phone buzzed.

Elise.

Still coming?

Clara stared briefly at the message before replying.

Of course.

Twenty minutes later she stood outside the Ashcroft Museum beneath a steel-gray sky while wind swept cold air through the avenue.

The museum rose above the street with the intimidating elegance of old New York wealth. Limestone exterior. Tall iron-framed windows. Steps worn smooth by decades of expensive shoes.

Inside, warmth wrapped instantly around her.

Museum air always smelled faintly the same to Clara. Dust. Varnish. Climate control. Old paper. Money.

Especially money.

She removed her gloves while crossing the lobby.

Visitors moved quietly beneath vaulted ceilings while security guards watched from discreet corners. Somewhere upstairs, schoolchildren laughed too loudly before a teacher quickly silenced them.

Clara envied them suddenly.

Children still looked at art honestly.

Adults looked at art strategically.

Near the archival offices downstairs, Elise Harper stood waiting beside a cart stacked with exhibition catalogs.

“Elusive as always,” Elise said.

Clara smiled and embraced her lightly.

Elise had once been in graduate school with Clara before choosing stability over academia. She now worked full-time in museum archives and possessed the permanently exhausted expression of intelligent women carrying entire departments on inadequate salaries.

“You look expensive,” Elise said, eyeing Clara’s coat.

“It’s Julian’s favorite.”

“That was not what I asked.”

Clara laughed softly.

Elise studied her more carefully then. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

Another lie.

Elise recognized it anyway but chose not to push.