

An excerpt from *The Art of Love*:

Gus dressed in formal attire and arrived an hour after the party had begun. No sense in milling around too long and having people think he actually *wanted* to be there. He talked to a few people he recognized and lingered at the back of the ballroom, watching the hoopla unfold. Turns out he'd made it to the Firestones' Pacific Heights mansion just in time.

“And now, may we present *The Family*, a painting by Amelia Starling.” Edward and Josephine, Will's parents, jointly pulled a silk cord and the curtain rose, so to speak, on a huge canvas.

The guests erupted in a collective “Oh!” The painting was incredible, unlike any family portrait Gus had ever seen. Instead of everyone in the picture looking straight ahead, they were in the middle of playing croquet on the front lawn of their estate. Will's brother, sister, and Will himself were in it, along with his parents, and Gus got the sense from their particular actions that they loved each other but there was tension too. He started to move through the crowd to see it better, but froze at what, or rather who, he saw next.

“And we are happy to introduce the creator of this brilliant work, Miss Amelia Starling.”

The woman who stepped forward, smiling at the crowd, was none other than Ruthie ... but not the sweet young girl Gus had met several weeks before. No. This woman was beyond beautiful, her eyes with some kind of color on them that made them seem even larger and more exotic than before, her gorgeous dark hair swept up with some kind of shiny netting woven through it, and glittery diamonds hanging from her delicate ears. And her body. Lord have mercy. Her body was encased in a long, deep-colored dress, a kind of red, he thought, that displayed her breasts and every other curve with elegance and grace. She was magnificent.

Gus was furious.

He strode through the crowd but stopped so that she could see him as she talked to one admirer after another. At one point she saw him and her eyes grew wide. He continued to stare at her and she didn't look away. The man she was talking to—a geezer with money, no doubt—finally had to touch her arm to get her attention. Good.

He waited, patiently, until the crowd had thinned and the Firestones had announced the buffet was open. Then he made his move.

“I take it this is what you meant by ‘a little of this and a little of that’,” he said.

She smiled awkwardly, looking around the room, probably for someone to come and bail her out.

“No one's going to rescue you this time ... Ruthie.” He stepped closer and noticed she was breathing rapidly; it was doing wonderful things to her cleavage. “Who is Ruthie, by the way? Did you just make her up on the spot?”

“No. It's my middle name,” she explained in a quiet voice. “Look, Mr. Wolff ...”

“Oh, so you know *my* name.”

“I knew who you were the instant I saw you.” Her chin rose. “Your ... reputation precedes you.”

“Ah. Well, I'll tell you what I tell everybody else: don't believe everything you read.” He cocked his head. “Why did you lie about who you were?”

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders. “I don't know. I guess I wanted to hear an honest opinion of my work. You would hardly have been straight with me had you known I painted it.”

Gus leaned in to whisper in her ear. She smelled like lavender. “I assure you, Miss Starling, I would be nothing but straight with you.”

The young woman stepped back and glared at him. “I’m sure you would be, Mr. Wolff, until the next distraction turned your head.” She made a point of looking around the room.

“Speaking of which, where is the melodious Miss Lindemann? I don’t see her anywhere.”

This woman was a pip. Gus wanted more of her. He captured her gaze and answered calmly. “Miss Lindemann and I aren’t seeing each other anymore. I haven’t been with a woman since before you and I met.” He mimicked her perusal of the ballroom, even though most of the guests had migrated to the dining area. “Come to think of it, where is your swain—or swains, as the case may be? Let’s see, there’s Charles, from the other night, and then there’s your *live-in*. What’s his name? Sander? My my, how do you keep them all straight?” He smiled wickedly. “Oh dear, there’s that word ‘straight’ again.”

Miss Starling’s delectable face, which had shown wariness before, now exploded into a storm of outrage. Apparently so mad she didn’t care who saw her, she pulled her arm back to slap Gus’s face. He caught her arm easily and wrapped it around his waist. Once again he pulled her close and nuzzled her. “I don’t give a damn who you’re with today, as long as you’re with me tomorrow.”

“That is never going to happen,” she hissed.

“Never say never,” he said, letting his breath caress her ear. He let go of her and stepped back, his voice rising to a normal level and his tone serious and heartfelt. “I am giving it to you straight, Miss Starling. I don’t know a lot about art, but I do know how something makes me feel. Your work is astonishing. You know how to capture the ... what shall I call it? The *truth* of a given moment. That is rare and something to be very, very proud of.”

The siren opened her mouth but no words came out. As they stared at each other, Will walked up. “Ah, I see you’ve finally met Lia,” he said. “Isn’t she spectacular?”

Keeping his eyes on her, Gus concurred with a murmured, “Yes indeed. Spectacular.” *That’s not the half of it* careened through his head. He had to have this woman. Had to. He smiled and added, “If you would be a good sport and escort Miss Starling to the dining room, I’m afraid I have to leave. Business, you know.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Come on, Gus. It’s New Year’s. You can take a least *one* day off.”

“No rest for the weary,” Gus said, heading over to the cloakroom. He stopped halfway and turned around. “Miss Starling. Amelia *Ruth*. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I love your work and want to talk to you more about it. I’ll be in touch. You can count on it.” He smiled at the frown he put on her face, turned around again, and left before she threw something at him.