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# CHANNELING JOSEPHINE CALLOT

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Romance, High Fashion & Fate in Belle Epoque Paris



*BOOK ONE*

## COMING OF AGE

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# MONTMARTRE

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## INITIATION

*Montmartre is a place to let one's hair down. Artists, poets, musicians, writers, and society's misfits, unconstrained by conventional norms, indulge in libertine lifestyles and unbridled passions. René, my gay friend, is privy to Bohemian culture. He promised me an introduction — “as soon as you turn seventeen.” The date has arrived.*

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I'm the last to leave work. I bolt the heavy warehouse door behind me, enter the street, and point my feet in the direction of home. The late afternoon sun hangs low in the sky before sinking below the horizon. Soft diffused light bathes the world in a warm golden hue, transforming the ordinary into a mystical apparition.

I walk swiftly to avoid the cold, past men with their caps drawn down and collars turned up, clutching the last baguette of the day under one arm. Peddlers hawk their wares. “Chaude les marrons!”<sup>1</sup> I inhale the hearty aroma of roasted winter chestnuts. The rank odor of horse manure offends my nose, as does the excrement of fancy dogs paraded around by uniformed servants. As the earthbound populace scurries about, overhead chattering birds gather to nesting places for the night. Lamplighters on the boulevard begin their nightly rounds.

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My ladies' maid, Marie, awaits my arrival to help me freshen up and change my clothes. I have posed in the mirror for weeks, hoping to find the perfect dress. I settled on a sensible gray, which complements my hair and eyes while making me appear a bit older and more mature. Marie assures me that I would be ravishing were I to wear a potato sack.

She styles my hair in an upward swirl with a silver comb, leaving, as per my instruction, a single lock dangling at the nape of the neck. I have it on good authority that it is irresistible to men. I gingerly open the ivory box of cosmetics gifted to me by René's dance hall girlfriends. No one in my family, no respectable woman I know of, wears makeup. I use it sparingly—a gentle blush on the cheek, cherry juice on the lips, and kohl applied to the upper lid and lashes. I take care not to resemble the whores in Montparnasse or, heaven forbid, to appear innocent. A final touch is Eau de Muguet<sup>12</sup>.

Will my new experience be romantic...or something to get quickly over with and out of the way? What if I fail? I have no examples. Proper French girls do not set their own conditions.

Am I foolish to freely give away something that has determined a woman's value for centuries? No! It is an impediment to my independence, future happiness, and fulfillment. I have no heroines to emulate. Guinevere? Juliet? Great love stories in literature and history all too often end in tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> Hot chestnuts

<sup>2</sup> Scent of Lily of the Valley

The doorbell chimes, waking me from my reverie. My coach has arrived, but it will not be golden nor have a single white horse. I take a deep breath. Thoughts I have been avoiding about less pleasant parts of the evening come flooding back.

I bolt out the door to find René standing at attention by a modest black two-seat carriage with an old driver and a tired-looking chestnut mare. A taste of reality must suffice for my rendezvous with destiny.

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We move east on Boulevard de Clichy, skirting the boundary between Paris *proper* and the hill of Montmartre. One could also say the thoroughfare skirts the border of *proper* Paris and the reputed village of art and sin. The route is heavily traveled, doubly so at the close of day. We navigate against the onrushing tide.

The iron-clad hoofs of legions of horses clatter on the stone pavers while hot breath from their nostrils forms misty clouds in the frigid air. Impatient coachmen weave in and out of traffic, furiously honking at obstacles in their path. A lone pedestrian emerges from the shadows. Oooga, oooga! Between daylight and nightfall, a press of humanity hurries home to the warmth of firesides.

Barren trees and peaked rooftops form dark silhouettes against the deep blue twilight sky. A few bright stars are visible; Orion's belt being the most prominent. We turn north onto Rue Caulaincourt and begin our ascent of the butte — the name by which locals call the great hill. Lone venturers, only the rhythmic clip-clop, clip-clop of our horse punctures the silence. As the road is dimly lit, our driver must rely on the light of the carriage lamps.

Closer to our destination, my heart races. I clutch the soft fabric of my cape. For two years, I have anticipated this rite of passage. Am I ready? I breathe deeply, gaze at René, and squeeze his hand. He rewards me with a paternal glance.

Evening progresses, unveiling a spectacular display of purple, orange, and red across the heavens. Is it an omen? Perhaps a harbinger of things to come. The colors slowly fade as dusk encroaches, ushering in a shadowy interlude preceding the darkness that beckons creatures of the night.

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A Roman temple to Mars once stood at the mountain's crest. Doubtless the site of many blood sacrifices, I contemplate wryly that I am about to add another— a sacrifice not to the god of war but to Venus, goddess of love. *I silently ask for her blessing as I leave behind the naivete of my youth.*

"We have arrived," René announces.

The infamous Lion's Paw Café wraps around the corner of Rues Muller and Ramey. Stretching down the sides of two streets affords it the most curbside real estate.

A weathered wooden sign hangs from an iron bracket high above the entrance. Battered by the north wind that blows incessantly on the mount, the hinges screech. The worn painting of a lion with its paw on a large ball bears no words. No one knows the establishment's actual name. Patrons refer to it simply as the 'Lion's Paw.'

The chill air stings my face as we disembark. I gather my courage and curtsy to the lion. The door creaks as we enter. The interior is cavernous, more so than appears from the outside. It

reeks of stale cigarette smoke and cheap wine. Gas lamps line the dark wood-paneled walls. Candles flicker on the tables. Men hang about a bar in the rear. I take in the scene. *I have gained admittance to inner sanctum.*

René arranged a birthday celebration for me with his cadre of friends. They dine here frequently on Wednesdays and are expecting us. Jacques, Michel, Henri, and Eugene are already seated, and having emptied one bottle of Beaujolais, uncork a second. Fortunately, their table is centrally located, affording a wide view of the environs.

“I believe you are acquainted with my comrades.”

“Yes.”

They kiss my hand exuberantly and toast me rowdily. “Bon Anniversaire, Mademoiselle Josephine.” *Gay men are such fun, a welcome change from the constant company of women-- my mother, sisters, the seamstresses, and customers in our dress shop. I can relax around them without the complications of sexual attraction.*

I glance about the room and survey the patrons lounging by the bar, taking stock of one in particular.

René orders dinner—baguettes, a huge platter of mussels, shrimp, and squid, followed by a salad and chocolate mousse. After coffee, he opens a small silver case and offers me a Gaulois. I draw on it. Hot smoke burns my throat. I choke. It is my first cigarette. He laughs. “You will get used to it.”

René signals to his companions that he and I have business to discuss. They exit hastily, but not before another round of hand kissing. They are delightful. I am certain this is not the last I will see of them. “Au revoir, gentlemen.”

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*It occurs to me that René is a perfect escort. Everyone here knows he is gay. They assume we are just friends, yet no one will approach our table uninvited.*

“You look absolutely fetching, my dear.”

“Thank you. I dressed specially for the occasion.”

“Aha. I would wager that before the evening is out, you will also *undress* specially for the occasion.”

“Amusing.” I roll my eyes and exhale with a sigh.

“René, the time has come to find a willing volunteer.”

“True. And I have every confidence that anyone you choose will happily *rise* to the occasion.”

“Quite enough! Your humor is noted but not appreciated. This is serious business.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist.”

“I forgive you.”

I take in the full measure of the attractive young man at the bar. He has a long face, regular features, a mustache, and a short-pointed beard. Shoulder-length wavy brown hair is tucked under the obligatory beret. His white shirt is open at the collar; dark trousers hug his slim body. I tilt my head in his direction.

“Who is that?”

“Ah, so you have noticed François. He is popular with the ladies. I am surprised he is alone tonight. But... I suspect not for long.” René grins salaciously. “He has been looking this way all through the evening.”

“He is a well-mannered fellow, a painter, moderately successful—well, struggling. The economy has not been favorable for artists. A Casanova, perhaps, but not full of himself like many of the others. You could do no better. At any rate, I think you have zeroed in on your prey.”

“You have an interesting perspective,” I respond cynically.

René pretends not to notice. “Shall I ask him over?”

“By all means.”

René relishes playing matchmaker. He beckons to François, who, without hesitation, strolls casually across the room.

“Good evening, François. I am happy to see you looking well. This is Mademoiselle Callot. Would you care to join us?”

“Merci. It is a pleasure to be in the company of a beautiful woman.” He kisses my hand.

*His eyes are pleasing. I like him.*

“We are celebrating Mademoiselle’s seventeenth birthday. Please, have a glass of wine.”

“Bon Anniversaire.” He smiles warmly and offers a toast.

“François, in honor of the occasion, we wish to discuss a delicate matter with you.” René strikes a match on his shoe and lights his cigarette. “You have a certain reputation with the ladies, do you not?”

François shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “I guess you could say so.” He purses his lips and takes a swig of wine.

“I do not like to equivocate, so I will get right to the point.” René draws on his cigarette and flicks the ashes onto a small tray. “Have you ever deflowered a virgin?”

Caught off guard, François lurches, and spits out his entire mouthful of wine. He blushes and wipes the table with a napkin. “Pardon.” Head bowed, he answers René quietly, “Oui, M’sieur. Several.”

“Good. Experience counts.”

“If I am to understand you correctly, Mademoiselle wishes to... uh...rid herself of an unwanted condition.”

“That is accurate.”

“I would be honored to assist.” He turns to me, his dark eyes dancing. “If Mademoiselle is agreeable, I will do my best to make the event as pleasurable and painless as possible.”

I reach across the table and put my hand over his. “Please, call me Josephine. I hoped you would consent.” *From the first touch, I feel a tingle of anticipation.*

René warns. “You must be discreet. Josephine is from a prominent family and wishes to keep her affairs confidential.”

“I understand.”

“Good. I believe you live in the neighborhood. What is your address?”

“Number 13 Feutrier. Three streets away.”

“Perfect. You may leave now. Start a fire. I will drop Josephine by in twenty minutes or so.”

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René and I sit in silence. The weight of my predicament sinks in.

“René, I have spent years preparing myself for this moment, yet I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of it. Have I made the right decision? Chosen the right partner? Perhaps I acted too hastily.”

“You are free to change your mind. If you do not show up, François will understand.”

“Do you think we will be... good together? I hardly know him.”

“Well, I have known him for some years. At heart, he is a good man. He understands your situation. I would not allow you to go with him otherwise. Have you two made a connection?”

“Well... yes... in a way... when I touched his hand, I felt a familiar warmth inside my body.”

“That is all you need to know, Josephine. You will be fine.”

“René, I may appear bold, but secretly I worry about how much it will hurt...and about the blood. Of course, that is a question you cannot answer. Even though you are *like* my best girlfriend, there are differences. I asked my mother, and she could not remember.”

“Does your mother know what you are about to do?”

“Certainly. My parents are progressive. They are dismissive of the church’s teachings, particularly regarding chastity. During their long engagement, Mother delayed marriage to pursue her career... until she got pregnant. My sisters had sex with their fiancées. They fell in love right out of school and had no desire for other experiences. On the contrary, I am not ready to settle down. I want to have fun.”

“There is a difference between sex with one’s fiancée and with a stranger.”

“True, but Mother always taught me to do what I believe is in my best interest. As my parents *adore* you, under your tutelage, they are certain no harm will come to me.”

“Now, I am not only your girlfriend but your surrogate father.” He laughs.

René’s face turns serious. “On that note, you must be careful not to get pregnant...or contract a disease. Either condition would ruin your good time and your prospects.”

“Thank you for the advice. My mother taught me to count the days when I am fertile. She also gave me some birth control—small sponges soaked in vinegar. I cannot use them tonight because they won’t fit, so he will have to pull out.”

“I’m sure François knows what to do.”

“As for disease, Mother told me to avoid anyone with a rash. Her other rules are ‘one man at a time’ and ‘forswear the company of gossips.’”

“Good advice. Preservation of one’s reputation is paramount. Parisians go to great lengths to cultivate respectable façades, assuring no one is privy to their personal affairs.”

“René, do you think François will be discreet?”

“I do. François is honorable while also possessing the requisite skills. You might consider him an expert in the field.” He raises his eyebrows. “He will look out for your welfare. You will be fine. You are not the first woman to face this challenge. I have every confidence in your success.”

“I trust your judgment.”

“Shall we go then?”

“Yes.”

“I will wait here for you. Jacques has set up a game of whist. By the time you return, he will doubtless be paying for everyone’s drinks. He will drive us home.

We embrace, put on our wraps, and exit the front door.

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## FRANÇOIS

François' quarters are sparse--one large room in which he lives, paints, and cooks. The fire is blazing, but the room is chilly. A few candles light the space. The familiar odor of cigarette smoke and cheap wine mixes with linseed oil, turpentine, and fresh paint. Half-finished canvases of nude models line one wall. I note that each is of a different woman. He has attempted to straighten up, but his housekeeping abilities are wanting. *His other abilities remain for me to judge.*

François welcomes me with a warm smile. As we stand facing each other, he takes my hands and looks into my eyes. "My dearest Josephine. Do not be afraid. Allow me to explain. There is a membrane inside you that is blocking the passage. It must be torn. In some women, it is thicker than in others. You will bleed. You will feel less pain if you are in the throes of passion—which I hope to bring you to. You are a beautiful woman."

"Merci."

*His voice is sincere. I feel comfortable with him. I want this to be a pleasant experience.*

"We should undress quickly and get under the covers." He has laid a towel over the sheet and piled up a few warm blankets. "Let me help you." He unfastens my cloak and lets it drop to the floor.

Disrobing is part of the ritual. He loosens the combs in my hair. Long reddish locks fall around my shoulders. He brushes them aside and kisses my neck...sweetly. My body begins to sway. He cradles my face in his hands and kisses me softly on the lips. My knees grow weak. He unbuttons my dress, unhooks my corset, and caresses my bosom. He slips off my silk drawers. *My anxiety is turning to excitement. I pray silently to the goddess that things continue to progress smoothly.*

"Get in bed or you will be cold."

I step out of my shoes and lie down. He pulls a blanket over me, makes quick work of taking off his clothes, and crawls in beside me. François is a small man, but strong, with an appealing physique and a smooth, hairless chest. I relish the sensation of his warm flesh against mine. He has a wonderful male smell. His skin feels smooth. To my delight, his arm muscles ripple sensuously as he moves. I run my hands along them and up into the little tufts of dark hair under his armpits.

François wraps his arms around me, nuzzles his nose against my face, and brushes his lips across mine. His organ swells and rubs against my leg. A deep urge responds inside me. We kiss. I close my eyes and open my mouth to receive his searching tongue. His hand cups my breasts as he kisses one hard nipple and then the other. *Oh, God... My breath comes in short bursts.* He moves his palm over my crotch and inserts two fingers. *Ah... I moan... it feels s-o-o good.*

"I think you will be fine." He whispers in my ear. "The barrier is not so thick, and you are very wet." He moves on top of me, slowly inserting the head of his hard member and moving it gently in and out...but not too deep. Then, with a sudden thrust, I feel a pinch and the flow of warm blood. I wince, but the pain is over quickly. I catch my breath. *I am glad he did not give me time to think. Such a relief!*

"Are you all right?"

I nod. He moves rhythmically inside me. *Yes! I lose myself in the delightful sensations. This is what I have waited for, not knowing how it would feel. I like it! I love it!* I lift my hips to meet him, and we pulsate together. My energy builds, but I wait for him to withdraw.

François grasps his erect penis and moves his hand with an urgency that I have witnessed before. His body tenses: his face contorts. I do savor watching these male creatures struggle to reach a climax. Afterward, he wipes the semen off my belly with a towel. His visage is calm.

“My dear, you have not had *your* pleasure.” He gently pushes my legs apart. His fingers find my sensitive spot and bring me to a powerful release. I lie in his arms and nuzzle against his neck. “François, you were perfect. Merci.”

He grins, revealing straight, lightly tobacco-stained, ivory teeth. “I am happy to be of service, Mademoiselle.” He plants a soft kiss on my cheek. Wrapped in a blanket, he sits on the edge of the bed and lights a cigarette. He draws on it and passes it to me. I am nervous, recalling my recent experience, but I pull a *short* puff into my lungs and exhale. *I did it! Two initiations in a single night! No one will ever regard me as innocent. Thank you, René, for helping me make a desirable choice.*

It is ten o'clock. The fire is dying, and while I would love to remain, I must return home at a reasonable hour. I will be more comfortable in my own bed. François helps me dress. I brought a rag to catch the blood. We walk the three streets back to the Lion's Paw. The crisp, fresh air feels surprisingly invigorating. We kiss goodnight at the café entrance. *So sweet.*

“Au revoir, François.”

“Au revoir, Josephine.”

He turns and walks back home.

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As I close the heavy wooden door behind me, our former waiter greets me with a smile.

“Good evening, Mademoiselle. M'sieur René is in the card room. I believe he is expecting you. He is just now buying drinks for everyone. I will fetch him.”

“No need, I heard you come in,” a familiar voice interjects.

“Ah, René, it seems you had an unexpected downturn in your luck.”

“He clears his throat and shrugs, “Don't rub it in.”

Jacques is not far behind. He leaves to rally his driver.

As we walk out, I help myself to a small souvenir, a single rose, a blood-red one from a vase on one of the tables.

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The faint odor of François's studio lingers on my clothes and in my hair. I will always associate the scent with this experience. I press my memento between the pages of a book. I lie awake, reliving the evening. Tonight, I left behind the dreariness of ordinary day-to-day society for a new adventure. I look forward to many more pleasures now that I have passed my initiation. From this time on, I shall live between two worlds.



