

PRELUDE



January 1899

THERESIANUMGASSE VIENNA'S FOURTH DISTRICT

Nineteen years old, Alma Maria Schindler longed body and soul for an awakening. In the family parlor, redolent with the perfume of hothouse lilies, she sat at her piano and composed a new song.

“Ich wandle unter Blumen und blühe selber mit,” she sang, as she played. *I wandered among flowers and blossomed with them.*

The lyrics were from a poem by Heinrich Heine, but the music was entirely her own. Closing her eyes, Alma let the song play itself, as though it were a living creature she had birthed and let loose in the world. Whether her music was any good or not, she had no idea, but it shimmered with passion poured straight from her heart. Painters, like her late father, the great Emil Schindler, revealed the innermost workings of their souls with brushstrokes, bold or delicate. The piano was her canvas, her notes the play of light and dark, color and texture.

“My art,” Alma whispered, and then jumped to see her sister, Gretl, one year younger, watching from the open doorway.

Still in her dressing gown although it was two in the afternoon, Gretl seemed to be nursing another headache. But instead of scolding Alma for making such a racket, she sat in the armchair beside the piano and asked her to play the song once more.

“It’s uncanny,” Gretl said, when Alma had finished. She gazed down at the book of lyric verse opened to the Heine piece Alma had chosen. “You

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always find a poem that expresses what's inside you. Anyone who hears this song will know you as well as I. It's that intimate."

Her sister's face was as pale as the lilies in their vase, and her dark eyes were fixed on Alma with a solemn scrutiny that unnerved her.

Alma searched for a lighthearted reply. "That explains why my lieder are so introspective! No jolly, thigh-slapping folk songs for me then."

To her relief, Gretl's mood seemed to lift and they laughed together.

"Just imagine," Gretl said, thumbing through the red-leather-bound Baedeker travel guide on the side table. "Another seven weeks and we're off to Italy! I can hardly wait to leave this dreary snow behind." At that, she went off to dress.

Alma played her song again, adding subtle variations to the theme. Joy seized her, a buoyancy that blossomed inside her. Losing herself in the labyrinth of sound, she allowed her yearnings to soar. *If only I were a somebody.* Oh, to compose an opera, a truly great one—something no woman had ever done. She would call her opera *Ver Sacrum*, sacred spring, after the journal of the Secession art movement. Her stepfather, Carl Moll, was the Secession's vice president. His paintings lined the parlor walls along with those of his colleagues and friends. Gustav Klimt. Max Klinger. Fernand Khnopff. Koloman Moser's exquisitely framed letterpress print spelled out the Secession's motto.

To every age its art.

To every art its freedom.

Freedom, Alma exulted. Her stepfather's circle was the vanguard, the cutting edge. They had defied the rigid conventions of the academy to create their own unique styles. After this break from tradition, the arts could never be the same again. As hidebound and conservative as Austria might be, with its emperor who seemed to live forever through every scandal and revolution, Vienna was a bubbling font of artistic innovation. *Ver sacrum, indeed!*

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N Not only were there avant-garde painters and architects, reform dress that

liberated women's bodies from crippling corsets, and new writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, but there were also young composers. With her entire being, Alma longed to leave her mark among these blazing new talents. Oh, to compose symphonies and operas that truly expressed the spirit of this modern age! How she longed for the vision and strength to see her dreams reach fruition.

Help me, divine power, she prayed, she who had disavowed all formal religion. Guide me. See me through. May I suffer no hindrance in the battle against my weakness. My femininity.

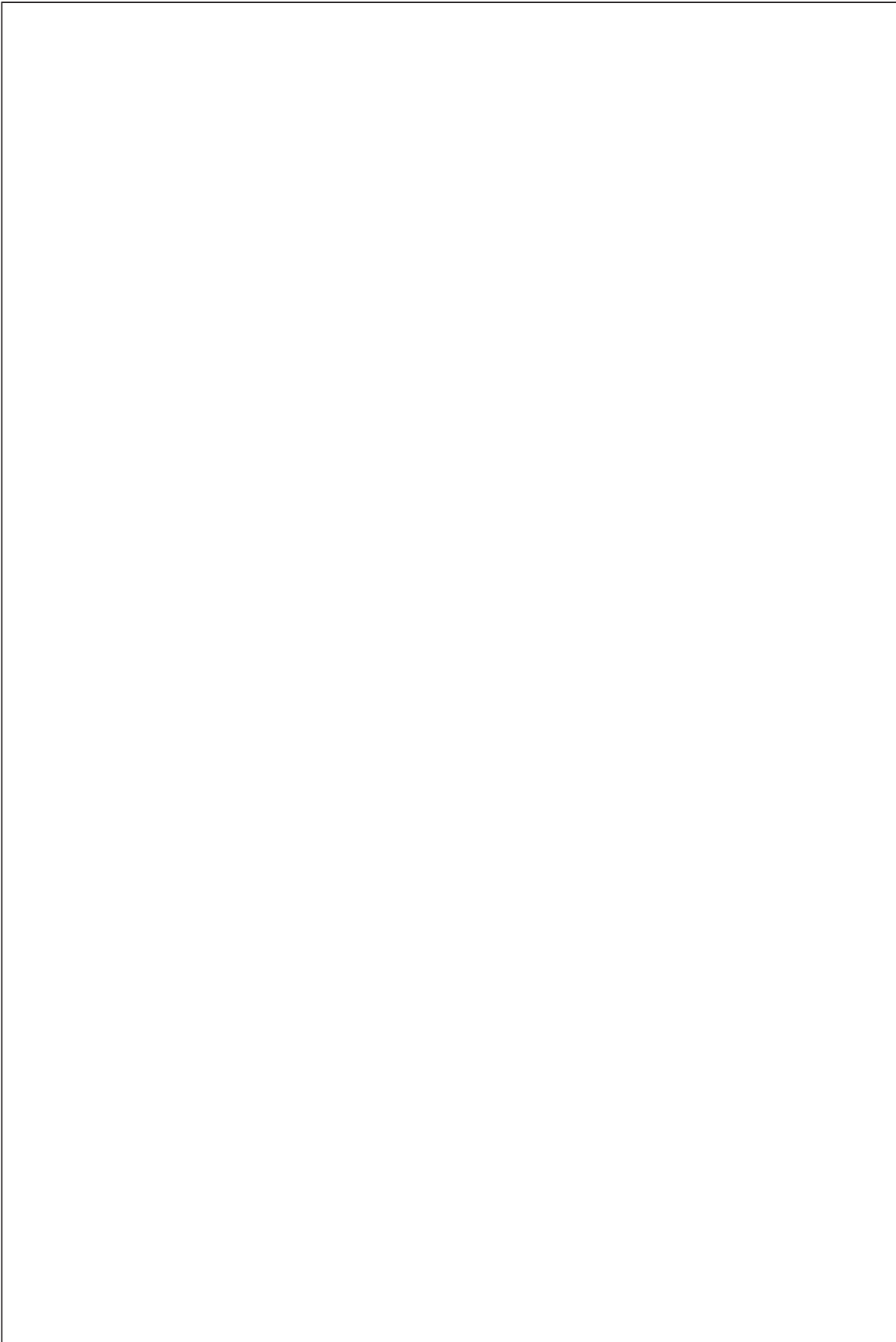
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May 1899

VENICE

Here is where my awakening shall occur, Alma told herself. In magical Venice, in the spring of the year and the spring of her life. Never mind that it was pouring rain and fog hung as thickly as wool.

In the hotel salon, she played piano, accompanying her mother who sang lieder to entertain their fellow tourists sheltering from the miserable weather. How beautiful was her mother's soprano, how flawless her diction. Mama had been an opera singer before she married Alma's father, now almost seven years dead.

At the song's close came a burst of applause. Alma beamed at her audience. Sitting among the English and German tourists were Gretl; their stepfather, Carl; and his colleague Gustav Klimt, who seemed to regard Alma with amused speculation. For Easter, Herr Klimt had given her a silly card of a shepherdess encircled by adoring sheep sporting gentlemen's hats—Alma kept it tucked in her journal.

He is so handsome, she thought, heat rising in her face. With his powerful body, his curly hair and beard, he reminded her of the figures on ancient Greek vases. If Gustav Klimt had even the faintest clue how infatuated she was, she would die. Thirty-seven years old, the most celebrated painter in all Vienna, he could marry a countess just by snapping his fingers.

Nonetheless, Alma made herself stare right back at him to prove she wasn't some giddy girl he could disarm with a smile.

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Her stepfather was so fond of Klimt, he had all but begged him to join them on their journey through Italy even though Klimt swore that he hated foreign travel and was terrible with languages. As a painter, Carl was nowhere near as brilliant as Klimt—or Emil Schindler, whose protégé Carl had been. *Klimt and Papa are giants*, Alma told herself. But Carl was a lesser talent who hung on to the coattails of the great in hope that some of their glory might rub off on him. It wasn't that her stepfather was a bad man, but Alma often wondered why Mama seemed to worship him.

Alma set her sights higher. Nothing less than a man of brilliance would do for her, a truly modern man who understood her need to continue composing even after she was married. She wasn't one, like her sister, to settle for the very first suitor. Gretl was engaged to the tedious Wilhelm Legler, a painter of almost numbing mediocrity. No, Alma vowed to wait for the right man, the one whose love would help her unfold to her highest purpose.

Rising from the piano bench, Alma was gathering up her music scores when an elderly English lady approached her.

"Fräulein, you played so beautifully, like a concert pianist," she said. "Tell me, who was the composer?"

"I am," Alma replied. She lowered her eyes.

"My daughter composed all eight lieder we performed," Mama added, with warmth and pride.

The English lady seemed most impressed. She grasped Alma's hands. "Keep on composing, won't you, dear? Show the men that we women can achieve something."

Alma found herself flushing and speechless, seized with both a bottomless joy and an ambition that left her breathless. Many a girl showed talent and promise only to give it up for marriage, as Mama had done when she was only twenty-one and pregnant—out of wedlock!—with Alma. But wasn't a new age dawning, all the rules for art, music, and society changing at once?

S As the English lady and her companions took their leave, Gretl announced that she was dying for a game of whist, so Mama and Carl sat
N down with her at the card table. But Alma could think of no pastime more

deadening to the intellect and spirit. Mumbling her excuses, she carried her music scores upstairs to the room that she and Gretl were sharing.

Closing the door behind her, Alma sank into an armchair and buried herself in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which Mama considered unseemly for a young girl. But Mama had long given up trying to control what Alma read. *You're so stubborn*, her mother was always saying. *So boneheaded*.

Yet truth be told, Alma was rapidly losing patience with Emma Bovary. She found the character incomprehensible. Her madness, her degrading love affairs, her endless lying to herself and others—was this woman flighty, cowardly, or simply coarse and common?

Tossing the book aside, Alma opened the French doors and stepped out on the balcony to breathe in the fresh, cool air now that the rain had finally let up. The canal below was gray with a shimmer of yellow as the sun broke through gaps in the fog. Gray was her favorite color, the way it so seamlessly merged with other hues. An artist's daughter, she observed how every raindrop on the balcony rail became a gleaming pearl. The crumbling palazzos across the canal seemed almost rosy. Everything flickered and glowed in dreamy gray light.

Hearing a noise in the room, Alma left the balcony and stepped inside.

"Gretl?" she called. She had left the door unlocked since her sister was always forgetting her key.

Instead, she found Gustav Klimt standing in the middle of her room. Her heart began to pound even as she told herself that he must be looking for Carl and had wandered in here by mistake.

"Alma," he said. "Are you on your own?"

"Why, yes," she said, without thinking. "The others are—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Klimt crossed the room in two huge strides. A gasp caught in her throat as he pulled her body against his, kissing her with vehemence and heat, his lips firm and insistent, his beard bristling against her chin. Her first kiss.

What magic was this? It was as though her hidden longing had summoned him straight into her embrace. Time seemed to drop away, everything

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before or after this single moment diminishing into nothingness as the ecstasy surged inside her, crashing like a wave inside her heart.

Klimt cupped her face to his. "I could see all the passion locked inside you while you were playing the piano. The time has come to set it free."

She trembled just to gaze into his gray green eyes.

"Love me," he whispered, running his fingers around her lips.

She tenderly caressed his hair, feeling the thick, springy curls twining around her fingertips. She kissed him with a hunger that left her aching. The soft quivering in her belly and knees was countered by a shooting heat, a rising energy that made her want to dance. But instead of losing herself in her frenzy, she made herself slow down, kissing him with deliberation, savoring each nuance of his lips against hers, her chest against his, their lungs swelling in unison as if sharing the same breath. All the dusty descriptions of love scenes she had read in *Madame Bovary* and elsewhere seemed meaningless now. *This* was what passion, what awakening, truly was.

When Klimt asked if he could take out her hairpins, Alma nodded, moved beyond speech. He pulled them out one by one until her brown hair fell over her shoulders like a cloak. As if in holy awe, Klimt drew back and stared.

"How I long to paint you."

He positioned her before the full-length mirror. His arm around her waist, he stood behind her, looking over her shoulder. When their eyes met in the mirror, he commanded her to look at herself, as though he, the artist, were revealing her own image to her for the very first time. Alma squirmed but couldn't take her eyes off the mirror, for this was as exciting as it was uncomfortable.

This is what men see when they look at me. Tall, she stood shoulder to shoulder with Klimt. Her face was flushed with yearning, her blue eyes huge, blinking rapidly.

S "You are so ripe and voluptuous," he said, drawing her attention to her
N waving tresses flowing over her breasts. His hands traced the curve of her
hips. Swinging her around to face him again, he stroked her hair.

“Alma,” he said. “My little wife.”

Oh, to marry Klimt.

A sweet ache bloomed inside her as they kissed, his tongue flicking between her teeth. Then she jolted at the sound of Mama’s and Carl’s voices in the adjoining room. Before Alma could think what to say or do, Klimt vanished, leaving her shaking and alone with her undone hair.

Moments later, Gretl sauntered in and looked at Alma as though she’d caught her sleepwalking.

“What, so dishabile in the afternoon?” her sister cried. “Did you catch the swamp fever? Mama says we must get ready and meet downstairs in a quarter of an hour. With any luck, Herr Klimt will come sightseeing with us.”

“What’s ailing you, Alma?” Mama asked, as they ambled across the Piazza San Marco. “There’s such a high color in your face. You look feverish.”

“Maybe it’s something I ate,” Alma managed, her heart beating hard and fast.

To think her mother could tell with just one glance that she was forever changed. She didn’t feel feverish as much as electrified. The fog had cleared and the blue sky opened into infinity. All around her Italian voices lilted like minuets. Ah, the gorgeous chaos of this square with its accordion players and acrobats and boisterous families and whispering lovers. This sense of utter freedom and levity was something Alma could have never experienced back in Vienna, where every single aspect of existence was so regimented, where even the parks were walled and gated, and it was forbidden to sit on the grass. Possessed by a whimsical abandon, she could barely keep herself from skipping and leaping like the laughing children racing one another across the cobblestones.

“Perhaps we better go back if Alma’s not well,” Mama said to Carl. “She should lie down and rest.”

“Nonsense,” said Carl, in his usual hearty fashion. “Fresh air and exercise will do her a world of good.”

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Klimt trailed behind Alma, the heat of his very presence warming her back. Her lips felt swollen, inflamed from his kisses. *Alma, my little wife.* Mama said it was time he was married. Alma's heart soared—was *this* why Klimt had allowed Carl to entice him on this trip even though he despised travel—because he wanted to court her? Perhaps Mama and Carl were even encouraging him—why wouldn't they want to see her married to the president of the Secession movement? As his wife, Alma would compose operas as magnificent as his paintings.

Klimt fell into pace with Alma and took her arm. "Do you feel out of sorts, my dear?"

Alma offered him a secret smile and nodded.

"I am as well," he said under his breath. "You know, there's only one cure."

"What's that?" she heard herself ask, reveling in the strength of his muscled arm.

"Complete physical union," he whispered.

If he hadn't been supporting her, she would have tripped over her skirts and tumbled face-first. She and Klimt pressed on, disturbing a flock of pigeons that took to flight in a flutter of countless wings, gray feathers stroking soft spring air.

Then Carl claimed Klimt's attention, and Alma burst forward on her own, past Mama and Gretl, into the great doors of Saint Mark's Basilica. Trying to master the storm of sensation exploding inside her, she threw back her head to take in the ancient mosaics filling every cupola. Never had she seen so much gold or magnificence—but even that was not enough to put Klimt out of her mind.

"This is more beautiful than Saint Peter's in Rome," Alma said, when Mama finally caught up with her. She hoped to at least sound like her usual self.

A few weeks ago, her family had attended Easter High Mass at Saint Peter's, an experience that Alma viewed as the greatest ecclesiastical swindle of

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all time—so much empty pomp. After studying the works of Nietzsche, she considered religion a ludicrous throwback from an authoritarian past, irrelevant in this modern world of science and progress. It was up to every intelligent man and woman to make their own moral choices rather than slavishly obeying priests. Yet this basilica moved her to spiritual contemplation.

She lifted her face to the Dome of the Holy Spirit, where dove's blood streamed down to anoint the heads of saints, filling them with Pentecostal fire. *This mosaic is a revelation, she thought, of what is unfolding inside me.* Her soul ignited with sacred love and reverence merging with the profane carnal flame that flickered inside her. When two souls met in love, how could it not be holy? *Complete physical union.* Alma's hammering pulse sent her head swimming. *Oh, to live, to truly live.*

When Mama and Gretl wandered off, Alma found herself entranced with the mosaics of the life of Saint Mark over the high altar. She swallowed a cry when Klimt appeared beside her, as if stepping out of thin air.

"I want to paint you dripping in pure gold leaf," he said, taking her hand. "Like a saint in ecstasy."

His face was so close to hers, she wondered if he would kiss her right there in the basilica.

"You vixen," he said, kissing her, his tongue parting her lips. "You know I can't resist you when you look at me like that."

This time, after a furtive look around, she kissed him back before drawing away, which only made him step closer.

"No one can say we didn't stand together at the altar," he whispered.

As they exchanged smiles, laughter rose inside her. *To be loved by Gustav Klimt.*

"Come," he said, squeezing her hand. "Time to join the others."

Carl decided they would take refreshment at Caffè Florian, where they shared two bottles of Asti Spumante between the five of them. Then they headed back to the hotel for dinner. Alma, her arm linked with Klimt's,

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brought up the rear, close enough to Mama and Carl to appear completely respectable. Her secret tingled inside her like champagne bubbles bursting on her tongue.

In the soft May twilight, they all stopped on a bridge to view the arch of the Ponte dei Sospiri, the Bridge of Sighs. Gretl, meanwhile, complained of a terrible headache and charged forward, giving Mama and Carl no choice but to follow. Alma prepared to walk on as well, but Klimt stood as if rooted and wouldn't release her hand. She shivered at the touch of his fingers digging into the high collar of her shirtwaist. When he leaned her back against the stone parapet, she felt her neckline tighten, constricting her throat. She had no clue how to respond, and now the others had disappeared around a corner. His gray green eyes appeared to her as an ocean of desire as his fingers traced the tender hollow between her collarbones, the delicate flesh covering her breastbone. *In Vienna, he would have never dared take such liberties*, she thought. But here in Venice, anything could happen. Every rule and even time dissolved in the briny waters of the lapping lagoon.

"Alma!" Her mother was calling from somewhere beyond a flower cart.

Klimt let go of Alma's collar only to pinch her arm and kiss her lips.

"Silly girl," he said. "If I'd wanted to, I could have laid my hands on your heart."

She flushed when she understood that what he meant by heart was actually her breasts. Then, fighting to regain her composure, she found herself staring not into Klimt's eyes but Mama's. Her mother's mouth was a pale tight line. Behind Mama, Carl looked at Alma and then at Klimt in utter incomprehension. Gretl shook her head at Alma as if to tell her what a fool she was.

"Alma," Mama said crisply. "Why don't you walk on Carl's arm? *I shall walk with Herr Klimt.*"

When her mother was angry, her northern German accent grew more pronounced. Mama hailed from Hamburg. Her father was a failed brewer, so Mama had been forced to make do and earn her own living as an opera

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singer when she was a girl. Now her mother resembled an avenging Valkyrie. Even Klimt seemed to cower in the face of Mama's rage.

"How could you be so naïve, a bright girl like you?" Mama demanded.

Alma and her mother were alone in the room her mother shared with Carl. Through the thin walls, Alma could hear Gretl pacing in the adjoining room—her sister would hear every word. As for Carl, he would be off somewhere with Klimt, trying to smooth things over. Carl, the eternal sycophant, torn between family honor and his horror of alienating his most important colleague. But Mama was clearly not conflicted in the least. All artistic gradations of gray were lost to her mother, who seemed to view the world in stark black-and-white.

"Gustav Klimt is a womanizer." Mama gripped Alma's shoulders as though to make those words sink in. "He has no business toying with you. I hope you didn't encourage him."

Alma burned and wept, still in the thrall of Klimt's kiss, of his fingers that had played her breastbone as if it were a flute. How could Mama be such a hypocrite? Had she herself not fallen in love with a great artist, Emil Schindler, and surrendered body and soul to him before they were married? That was how her mother had conceived her, for God's sake. There were darker rumors—namely that Mama had an affair with Papa's friend, the artist Julius Victor Berger, and that Gretl, christened Margarethe Julia, was that man's child.

How Alma yearned for her dead father. He had given her Goethe's *Faust* to read when she was only eight, as if acknowledging her as a prodigy, his equal. If Papa was still alive, her life would be so different. They would probably still be living in Schloss Plankenberg, that run-down rented castle fifty miles west of Vienna where they had lived like true bohemians, far removed from Carl's world of social climbing and bourgeois pretensions. She imagined Papa giving her and Klimt his blessing.

"Herr Klimt and I are in love," Alma heard herself declare in tremulous defiance.

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“Don’t be so stupid,” Mama said, her words as stinging as a slap on the cheek. “The man has syphilis! He always has at least three love affairs running at the same time. Why do you think I never let you visit his studio? Because it’s no better than a brothel with his naked models prancing around. *Two* of those poor girls are pregnant by him. The man is obsessively in love with his *sister-in-law*.”

Klimt is a bohemian freethinker, Alma told herself, *and no doubt he’s had love affairs, but surely he can’t be as debauched as Mama claims*. Her mother made him sound like a scoundrel from a penny dreadful. Would Carl have invited Klimt to join them on their travels if the man was truly so fiendish?

“He called me his little wife,” Alma said, desperate to sound reasonable despite the tears running down her face. “You yourself said it was high time he married.”

“Marry someone rich and experienced perhaps, but not an innocent girl like you.” Mama sighed. “Did you know he’s already supporting his mother and sister, and his sisters-in-law and his niece? Insanity runs in his family! His mother and sister are mentally unbalanced. One day he’ll go mad himself. Just look in his eyes, Alma. There’s something crazy about him.”

Alma was beginning to feel half-crazed herself as Mama’s disclosures pierced her like flaming arrows. The illustrious Gustav Klimt was merely a degenerate seducer? But that kiss! How could she ever forget his kiss that had transformed her in one shuddering gasp from a girl into a woman who had tasted the ecstasy of desire?

Both she and Mama spun around as Carl strode in, stinking of cigar smoke.

“Klimt has agreed to return to Vienna tomorrow,” her stepfather announced, rubbing his hands as though washing them of any unpleasantness. He faced Alma squarely. “In the morning, you’ll shake his hand civilly and bid him farewell. He assured me this was just a dalliance, quite regrettable, of course. He apologized profusely and promised to leave you alone.”

S “A *dalliance*?” Alma thought her shame would set her entire body on fire,
N immolating her on the spot.

“I told you as much,” Mama said in a tired voice, as though her tirade had exhausted her.

“Why must you take it all so seriously?” Carl asked, as Alma collapsed sobbing on her mother’s bed. “Weren’t you just being a flirt?”

At some stage everyone must die a secret death. Her face raw from weeping, Alma lay awake in the bed she was sharing with Gretl, who snored away, lulled into deepest sleep by the laudanum their house doctor prescribed for her headaches. Klimt’s betrayal, his casual dismissal of what had unfolded between them, plunged Alma into a hell of self-loathing. Smug little demons, as relentless as the mosquitoes whining in her ears, parroted her mother’s exhortations: *How could you be so naïve?* Her first kiss, the first time she’d ever truly fallen in love—must it end like this?

Worst of all was the conundrum of the desire Klimt had awakened in her that was coupled with the gaping canyon of her own ignorance. It was as though he had led her to the very threshold of that forbidden paradise, let her taste a single drop of that most exquisite nectar, then slammed the door in her face and left her there. An overwrought and humiliated virgin.

Any young man of her age and class would have unburdened himself in the brothels by now, but because she was a girl from a prominent family, she was expected to carry her frustration to her marriage bed. Marriage now seemed as nebulous and distant as the Pleiades.

Back in Vienna there had been the young artists and intellectuals who frequented her stepfather’s salon, those young men who flattered her and vied for her attention across the linen-draped table. But not one of them had dazzled her to her very core the way Klimt had. None had presumed to kiss her. The flirting, the pleasantries, had all seemed a game to her, like dancing with different partners at a ball, everything refreshingly light and frivolous without the pressure of having to choose one and forsake all the others.

But Mama said it was time Alma learned to be sensible and pick one young man from that glittering circle. *Listen, Alma, you’re at the height of your beauty. You’re in demand. Make up your mind! But try not to intimidate them,* S N

my dear. You can be so bold and opinionated. Perhaps if she was less ambitious about her music or learned to conceal it the way Gretl hid her sketchbook to better fawn over Wilhelm Legler's lugubrious oil paintings. But how, Alma wondered, was she to make the right choice of a suitor when she knew so little about the physical realities of love?

She seethed with a lust that shook her to her fingertips. *There's only one cure*, Klimt had told her. If he appeared by her bedside, she would let him do whatever he wanted even in the face of her anguish and his duplicity. She would run her tongue over his salty flesh, bite him, devour him, make him hers. But she must go unsated. As for touching herself, that was too appalling to even consider. Such acts were the province of the insane and morally depraved—and those who didn't share a bed with their sister.

If only she could cool her scalded fingers on smooth ivory piano keys. She was tempted to creep down to the parlor and pound out the entire score of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* even if she woke up every soul in the hotel. Let her leave Klimt as sleepless and churned up as she was. She imagined playing the "Liebestod" theme until she was utterly spent. The sole way out of this wretchedness was to channel all her longing into what she *could* control, her own music.

Her thoughts wandered back to her recital that afternoon before Klimt's kiss and her undoing. The English lady's cornflower eyes meeting hers as though this stranger were a kindly godmother or even a prophetess. *Keep on composing, won't you, dear? Show the men we women can achieve something.* Let her show Klimt that she had a gift that no man could take from her.

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