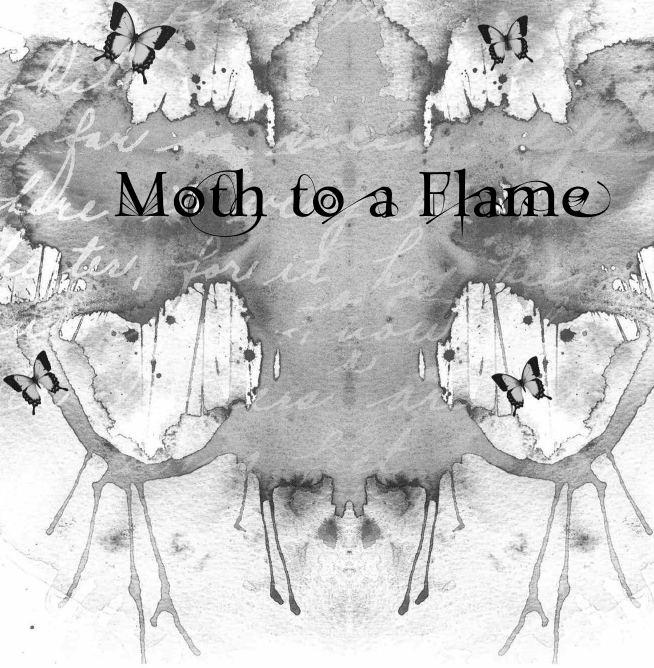


I

Moth to a Flame





# Chapter 1

Ondine Mason hated butterflies. That wasn't true. She just hated orange butterflies. No, that wasn't true either. What she really hated were the orange butterflies painted on her blue ceiling, the ones she was staring at as she tried to wake up.

They seemed to move. One moved. Ondine could swear one moved. One had a woman's head. It looked at her. Not cruelly, just *coolly*. As if it were studying her. It crawled off the ceiling and flew away.

'Ondine!'

That would be Ralph.

She pressed her fingers to her eyelids. Everything that had been orange turned blue, and all that was blue, orange. The effect was called the afterimage. She had learned about it in Raphael Inman's summer art class. The afterimage appeared after you stared at something for a long time then shut your eyes, proving Ondine's long-held feeling that what was real was part in the world and part in her head. A butterfly, after all, had just flown out of a painting.

This didn't happen in the real world. But part of Ondine knew that it didn't really matter what happened in the real world. What mattered was what she saw. There was a real world in the afterimage, too, just a different one, intense but momentary.

She kept her fingers there until the stars came and her eyes began to hurt.

The butterflies looked like orange eggs stacked on each other, split by cigars. They were awkward and childish and they made Ondine feel embarrassed. She and her mother, Trish, had painted them a long time ago, when she was eight and Trish, an architect, had just finished renovating the house on Northeast Schuyler. Her father, Ralph, had set up a scaffold and she and her mother painted lying down on their backs, as Ondine imagined Michelangelo had done in the Sistine Chapel. They wore head scarves so they wouldn't get paint in their hair, and they transformed the whole ceiling into a jungle set against windless blue. In it they placed a panther, a bald eagle, a monkey, and a tiny white mouse hidden in the corner – she felt the panther needed company – all interspersed with bright bursts of orange butterflies set among green leaves.

'Très Rousseau,' her mother had said. Ondine didn't know what it meant, but it sounded good. She had loved butterflies then.

'Ondine, get your butt out of bed and come down and help your mother!'

She looked at the clock. Ten-twelve. In exactly three minutes, fifteen minutes after Ralph Mason had told his only daughter he wanted her downstairs to go over last-minute details of the move (the Masons were supposed to be on the road by noon), he would be pissed. Though *pissed* was a relative term with Ralph. Ondine's father was a mild-mannered man, more scientist (which is what he was) than domineering dad. When Ralph got pissed, he set things down in an aggressive way, like his cup of coffee. Ondine could just see him now, really placing that mug down like he *meant it, young lady*.

She was going to miss him.

She was also going to miss Trish. Even Max she'd miss, though she wouldn't miss taking Max's mangy terrier, Ivy, to the park every day while her precious little brother had his cello lessons.

This was because Trish and Ralph and Max were moving to Chicago.

Ondine was not.

And this made her hate butterflies even more.

Ten-fourteen. She yanked on a pair of her father's old scrubs and headed down the stairs.

\* \* \*

'So, Ellen and Mark are just next door, and you know you can always call the Harrises, and your first trip to Chicago is in just a month. Honey, are you sure you want to do this?'

Trish Mason was not looking at her daughter when she spoke. She was looking out the dining-room window at the Japanese maple, whose new leaves were shooting pinky-red arrows toward a mercury-colored midmorning sky.

Her mother, Ondine knew, was crying. Trish always cried. Ondine, never. It wasn't that she didn't feel sad. She just couldn't seem to get the tear ducts working when they should. Her throat would swell, her cheeks flush, she'd feel awful, but nothing would come out. When she was younger she'd practice with Visine, just to see what it felt like to have tears cascading down her cheeks, but since she wasn't much of a pretender and carrying around Visine made her look like a twelve-year-old pothead, Ondine became known as the girl who didn't cry. It made her popular on her soccer team – and scared in private. She told no one and allowed people to chalk it up to her naturally stoic nature.

Her mother flexed her fingers and put a hand to her eyes.

'We're going to miss you, you know.'

'I know', Ondine replied, and reached across the dining-room table.

Here is what Trish was crying about: The Masons had decided to go to Chicago for a year. Dr Mason, an obstetrician turned in vitro pioneer turned geneticist, had gotten a yearlong research grant at the Chicago office of Xelix Labs, the genetics think tank based in Portland. The family – Trish and Max, that is – had decided to go with him. Trish, originally from the Midwest, wanted a change of scenery and had clients in Chicago. Max, a cellist, wanted to study at Spenser Conservatory. Ondine had asked to stay, to the surprise of her parents, though they were used to their only daughter being headstrong. She wanted to finish high school with her friends, she said. She also wanted to study with Raphael Inman, the legendary Portland art star who had returned from New York and was now teaching at Reed. That was usually how it went, Ondine going in the opposite direction from her family. She didn't know why; it just did.

She squeezed her mother's left hand, and Trish's wedding ring of twenty years – three years older than Ondine – glowed in the sun.

'Are you sure *you* want to do this?'

Trish sighed. 'No. But it would really help if you wouldn't be so pigheaded and come.'

Ondine twisted in her wooden chair. 'I told you. I'm not going to some whack-ass suburban school in – what's it called? Glencoe? – for my senior year. She could hear her own childishness. She was normally calmer, but now . . . now she had to act like a brat. It would help them leave. 'I'm not the

one who decided to take the sabbatical in Chicago – Dad did. And you and Max wanted to go with him. But my life is here, Mom! She looked at her mother. ‘You decided to go. Remember? We all sat around this table’ – she tapped the dark wood and it sounded in the open room – ‘and we voted, and Dad wanted to get the grant, and Max said he wanted to be in a city with a better symphony, and you wanted to be closer to Nana, and Vita is in Chicago, and you liked that stuffy Glencoe with all of its antique shops –’

Trish, used to her daughter’s bossiness, laughed and covered her long, narrowish face with her hands. Tall and slender, her mother could pass for thirty-five, Ondine thought, though she was almost fifty. Only recently had she begun to go gray, and the white strands traced her mother’s black hair like snow on dark branches.

‘Evanston, Ondine. We’re in Evanston. Not the same thing!’

‘Ooh, I know what’s gonna happen!’ Ondine went on. ‘When I come you’re gonna be wearing a fur coat, and we’re gonna have a butler in our mansion in Glenkillyour soul –’

Trish stood and kissed her daughter on the crown of her head and then pinched the back of her neck.

‘I’m getting another cup of coffee, and that one’s from Max. You’re going to miss him, Miss I-Don’t-Need-No-One!’

‘Huh!’ Ondine blinked.

‘You want one?’

‘You know I don’t drink Starbucks!’

‘No, you just eat the ice cream!’

‘Not fair!’

Trish called back from the kitchen. ‘No, baby, that’s your problem!’

Ondine looked out the dining-room window at the maple in the backyard. Her parents had planted it a few days after

they brought Ondine home from the hospital. They called it their baby tree. Now it was full-grown.

It had started to sprinkle – early summer was often rainy in Portland – and the branches were black and slick. The tree's leaves were sprouting; the spears that emerged from the crooked branches hinted at the fullness of the summer tree. There was an awkwardness about the tree, though. Dwarf Japanese maples were small and packed, as if there was too much activity for the spindly limbs to handle. Like Ondine herself: petite and delicate – peaked caramel-colored face, bright mouth, pointy limbs – in a family of stately pines.

And her eyes, violet, like the sky before a storm. Ralph and Trish had brown eyes. Max's were hazel. But Ondine? No, Ondine's eyes had to be *purple*, wide set, and heavily lashed. Beyoncé and Yoda's love child. Dr Mason couldn't even try to explain that one.

'Sweetheart.' Ralph kissed his daughter on the top of her head and placed a mug of coffee in front of her. His face was paler from winter and she loved the way the freckles splashed across it like mud on a Portland sidewalk. 'Everything's pretty much packed, doll.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

Though her father knew she didn't drink Starbucks, he was absentminded and anyway, it smelled so good this morning. Ondine thought of all the mornings ahead when Ralph wouldn't be making coffee, and though she had told herself she wouldn't, her throat swelled. She took a sip to quell it and looked up. A key ring looped around his bony fingers.

'Here are the keys – car, house, garage. Jesus. I just can't believe you're not coming. What's your mother going to do?'

He took his daughter's hand. 'Are you sure about this?'

Her sadness just made her more certain.

'The class at Reed this summer is the most important thing I can do for my art. Raphael Inman is teaching. He *never* teaches. I told you there was no way I could miss it. And next year's senior year. I can't switch schools for my senior year.'

She stopped, swallowing the rush of words that she knew probably sounded more like justification than anything else. Still, Ralph and Trish bought it. Most people did. Ondine could convince almost anyone to do almost anything.

Her father matched her silence. He was an affectionate man, and always told Ondine that he loved her, but living in a house with two strong women made him quiet at times. He looked into his daughter's eyes as if he would be able to locate what made her so stubborn.

'We're going to miss you.'

She pressed her hands into her knees and rubbed them.

'Dad –', she managed to respond. 'Don't make me change my mind.'

'Then don't do this, honey. There are lots of good programs in Chicago. The best school in the country is at the Art Institute –'

How many times had Ralph Mason looked at her in just this way, trying to read what was behind her velvety eyes? He couldn't. Ondine was a normal young woman, a budding painter, a bratty sister (at times), a good daughter, a great friend to the people she chose to trust. And though he had been there at her birth – delivered her, in fact – there was something untouchable about the girl that even her own father could not get at.

She traced circles on the dining-room table, where the Mason family had set their coffee mugs so many times before.

'Dad, I –'

She couldn't tell him about the dreams she'd been having:

the butterflies, the strange women. She couldn't tell him about the way the things she painted sometimes, if they were good enough, true enough, had a way of lifting off the canvas and floating away.

'Nice bed head.'

Max Mason walked in the back door with Ivy. He was a solidly built thirteen-year-old – Ondine thought a little pudgy, though he seemed to have slimmed down in recent months – and he was wearing his typical weekend outfit of a white hazardous waste-removal suit. He had begged his father to get him one from Xelix, and Ralph, perplexed yet strangely moved by his son's oddity, had.

'Yo, Pop! I'm ready!' Max's round, wire-rimmed glasses had fogged up in the early June chill. That combined with his leftover preadolescent tummy and his long arms and legs reminded Ondine of a jellyfish, all eyes and jiggling limbs. She watched her father's face lighten.

'All right, son.'

'Max, honey, are you ready to go?' Trish came out with yet another cup of coffee for Ondine, looked at her son, and shook her head. 'That suit's going to be uncomfortable in the car.'

He shrugged and grinned, but he was staring at Ondine.

'What?' She tipped her chin and fingered a loosening braid.

'You're actually sad.'

'Your dog stinks.'

'You are,' he retorted through a stuffed nose. 'I can tell.'

'Honey,' Trish turned to Ralph, 'did you give her the folder?'

'Oh, right.' Ralph got up from the table and picked up the manila folder containing numbers his daughter would never call, insurance cards she would never use. Ondine had

not visited a doctor since her childhood inoculations. She never had a sniffle, an ache or a pain, a bruise or a scratch. She took the folder and wondered whether her father – like she did – hoped that, just once, she would come up with a scraped knee, or would tell her parents her throat was sore and she didn't feel well enough for school today. Or would fall and break something: nose, collarbone, pinkie nail. Anything to prove she was indeed a creature of flesh, blood, and bone.

'Well –' Ralph put his cup down and twisted it so that the Xelix Labs logo squared with the edge of the table. Ondine knew it was her cue. It was time for the Masons to leave. She looked at her family gathered there in the half-light of morning, the maple behind them.

'Max, I will miss you,' she began slowly, getting up from the table. 'And I will miss you, Mom, and I will miss you, Dad.' She pronounced the words carefully, formally. 'But I'm staying here.'

Her mother put her hand to her eyes again. Ralph looked out the window.

'Maybe you'll come at the end of summer?' Max asked.

Ondine nodded. She thought of her butterfly, lifting soundlessly off the ceiling. Of the pale gelatinous tentacles of Max the jellyfish, corkscrewing from an even whiter canvas.

'I'll visit.'

Ralph cleared his throat. 'Well, I guess we'd better get on the road then. Max, you ready?'

'Yeah, Dad. I'm all set.'

Ondine embraced her father, hugged her mother and kissed her neck – she smelled like wood and flowers – and felt she would melt the whole time. She went over to her

brother and put her arm around him even though he was bigger than she was. The shiny white polyester of his silly suit crinkled in her grasp.

'Yeah, I'm sad, Max. I am actually sad. I'm human, aren't I?'

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For twenty minutes she lay on her bed. There was movement downstairs – voices, footsteps, doors opening and closing – but she had said her goodbyes. Ondine was like that. Once a decision had been made, she tended not to look back, and her family knew her well enough to respect that. Till then she liked to take time with her thoughts – like waking out of a dream is how they seemed to her. Ideas appeared as if by paint-by-numbers. A bit here, a bit there. Then the whole thing would cohere and she'd have made up her mind. Until then it was all just shapes and colors.

Ralph and Trish wouldn't come up anymore. When she heard the garage door groan and the U-Haul back onto N.E. Schuyler's quiet morning street, she knelt on her bed and watched her parents drive away.

A bird chirped. It had started to rain. Ondine lay down again, feeling weirdly calm. It was a Saturday in early June. School had ended a few weeks ago and she didn't quite know what she'd do now.

She picked up her cell and dialed a number she knew by heart.

'Hey, she began after a few moments. 'Yeah, they just left.'

The person on the other end said something and Ondine sighed. 'I don't know, sad.' She switched the phone to her other ear, leaning toward the window. 'Yeah, maybe that is just the thing. Tonight though? So soon?'

She nodded. 'All right. Call me at five. We'll figure out what to do then.'

She lay back down underneath the butterflies and watched the pieces collect.