

CHAPTER ONE



Joan Fernandez

## CHAPTER ONE

### PARIS

#### JO

Jimmying out the closest canvas, Jo van Gogh recognized one of the sunflower paintings. Pretty golds and yellows, yet the drooping blossoms looked a little forlorn. This was not the one she wanted. Gritting her teeth, she wriggled it back into the crate.

Morning sunbeams highlighted scattered dust across the flat stretch of wooden boxes shoved against every wall of the stuffy salon. Some were stacked on top of each other, blocking the settee and upright piano Aunt Cornelia had given them as a wedding gift, while other crates jutted out into the narrow room so that she had to edge sideways to cross it. The only free chair was squeezed under Theo's tall oak writing desk with its piles of mail and stacks of old *Le Figaro* newspapers.

Her fingers fluttered along the rough edge of the next crate. She had not looked inside this one. Yanking it open, she pushed the rough wooden top aside to peer into the slapdash row of paintings for a glimpse of a white sprig from *Almond Blossom*, Theo's favorite painting. If her husband came home—she jerked back—no, *when* he came home and saw it, he'd be comforted, reassured.

She thumbed the canvases. Stormy grays, speckled oranges, goldenrod yellows, but no fairylike pale blossoms. Frustrated, she slammed the top down.

This was just like her. She'd always doubted herself, always assumed others knew best. Pa had taught her to beware of errant female thoughts running contrary to common sense. So she'd gone along with her brother Dries's insistence to organize the paintings, not realizing he intended to hide them away in unmarked crates. No list, no record. She knew better; Theo would be very unhappy.

She sneezed, hugging herself as a chill flickered up her spine. A lingering odor of turpentine and sawdust hung in the stale air. She'd dressed in Theo's favorite gown. Never mind that the thin silk was for evening opera outings, the pretty violet would delight Theo, especially paired with the fashionable, dainty boots she'd brought from Amsterdam. But her feet must have grown when she'd been pregnant, for the shoes pinched, and now she had to take care that the gown wouldn't snag in the cramped aisle between the crates.

She couldn't give up. *Almond Blossom* was a good-luck charm, the ideal homecoming for Theo. She wanted his return this morning to be perfect.

She needed it to be.

Because once Theo was back at his desk, sipping a glass of his favorite merlot as Vincentje's feet kicked from his lap, he'd be content, relieved to be through his ordeal. That was when she'd seek his reassurance on her decision to send out Vincent's drawings to the Vingt exhibit in Belgium. A jittery staccato rose in her stomach. She shoved aside a crate top and riffled through the row. It was too late to withdraw the Vingt submission, but Theo had a way of calming her agitation. If her decision was a mistake,



*Work was going well, the last canvas of the branches in blossom, you'll see that it was perhaps the most patiently worked, best thing I had done, painted with calm and a greater sureness of touch. And the next day done for like a brute.*

—Vincent to Theo  
Saint-Rémy-de-Provence  
about March 17, 1890



*In January 1891, Jo is 29 years old, married to art dealer Theo van Gogh (1857 – 1891).*

*Though she taught English in a girls' school and had a skill for translation, she is new to the world of art.*

*In a letter to Theo, she conceded, ". . . you haven't discovered yet how amazingly ignorant I am."*

*In response, he assured, "I do hope the two of us will talk about [art] a lot because it touches my life more than anything else."*

he would make it right. His comforting words always made her feel safe. He might even be proud of her. Then they'd unpack the paintings and resume their work for Vincent together.

She shoved another lid aside, and her fingers flew through the artwork.

It had been three long months since Theo had left. Their most prolonged separation ever, longer even than the vacations she took to visit her family back in Amsterdam. Dr. van Eeden telegraphed regular reports that Theo's headaches were easing, but she couldn't help worrying he wasn't telling her everything. Didn't the doctor remember *she'd been here* when the asylum men had struggled to get Theo into a straitjacket? And *Theo had screamed her name*. Over and over as they'd scuffled. Surely Theo understood now that she had needed to call them for relief from the helpless nights when he'd writhed with agonizing pain, strangling on screams that had terrorized her and the wailing baby. Shuddering, she willed the images to fade, but she couldn't shake the shame of hiding as they had dragged him away.

The doctor's telegrams gave her hope. But when she; Theo's sister, Wil; and Mother van Gogh had taken the train to Utrecht to visit last month, the doctor had blocked their way, saying the hypnosis treatments for brain disease needed more time. She'd left without even a comforting glimpse of him.

Or the chance to explain. Ask his forgiveness for summoning those men.

Tiredly, Jo cocked her head to listen for the baby, but he was still sound asleep in their bedroom. Her aching eyes swept over the sea of boxes again. Theo would not like this at all. Twenty-seven crates, ten or more paintings in each, carelessly stowed away.

It didn't feel right. The paintings were the heart of their life together and always would be, even though Vincent was gone.

Seeing *Almond Blossom* again would remind Theo of their perfect union.

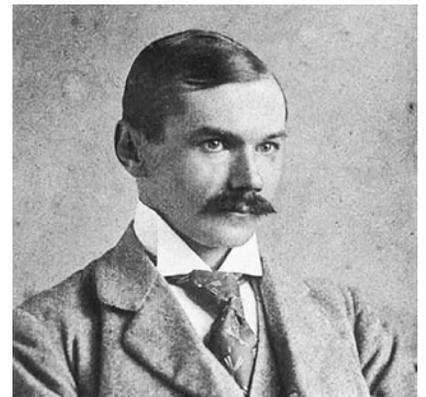
The canvas of delicate white-and-pink blossoms was her favorite too. She and Theo had married while Vincent recovered from his latest episode in the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum. Vincent had painted it a few months after Vincentje's birth. Though Theo assured her his brother approved, she'd known their marriage had inserted a wedge into the brothers' close relationship. *Almond Blossom* had felt like an olive branch.

For the hundredth time, she pulled from her pocket the thin telegram Dries had sent last night. She read aloud: "I have news. Arriving nine tomorrow." Closing her eyes, she pressed it to her chest. Dries had always been clumsy at keeping secrets. It made perfect sense that he would escort his best friend back home and want to surprise her. He'd played matchmaker before.

For from the first moment he'd introduced them, Theo had slid into a space alongside her, filling a gap she hadn't even known she had. As if, in some past life, they'd made a compact to find each other in this one. Agreeing to marry and follow Theo to Paris hadn't even been a choice. More like a foregone conclusion. A dream that had come true. For by being Theo's soulmate, she was blissfully, utterly complete. When she burned the roast, instead of scolding as Pa would have done, he laughed and claimed a cold supper of bread and cheese was exactly what he'd hoped for.



*Theo suffered from untreated infectious syphilis, probably contracted when frequenting brothels before being introduced to Jo when he was 30 years old. It's speculated that by November 1890 he was overcome by the disease's second stage, which can be latent for years and lead to severe brain damage. When Theo left for treatment at the asylum, he was forced into a straitjacket by two male nurses.*



*Frederik van Eeden (1860 – 1932) practiced psychiatry and attempted to treat Theo with hypnosis. His wife Martha would become one of Jo's closest friends, offering to help with the baby and loan Jo lots of books so that (in Jo's words) she would not suffer "book starvation."*

Being happy together is not just a matter of being kind to each other, as most people think. It is each spinning his own thread, knowing that if there's ever a difficult knot, one won't leave to unravel it alone, but will receive encouragement or help to sort it out.

— Theo to Jo, Paris  
February 11, 1889

When he woke at midnight, unable to sleep worrying over whether one of his artists could pay rent, she rose to console and listen. Theo had none of the abrasiveness of Pa's rough ambition. In the privacy of their home, Theo was a husband who shared his hopes and fears and wanted to know what she thought.

Because of him, she was the mother of a beautiful son. The first of many children they'd planned together.

She and Theo had a pact etched in their hearts.

Partners forever.

Outside the still apartment, cité Pigalle's clock-tower bells began to ring. Nine o'clock. With her heart in her throat, she'd already turned to the entry as a sharp knock reverberated through the flat.

Rushing to the door,, she flung it open. Dries stood in front of her.

She tried to chuckle—the tease. Pushing him aside, she peered behind him.

No one.

"Where's Theo? Dries . . ." Jo's words fell away, silenced by her brother's red-rimmed eyes.

"I need you to sit down." He caught her arms. With numb steps, Dries pushed her through the crate path and dropped her into the desk chair. He knelt in front of her. "I have news—"

"Theo's worse," Jo babbled, frantic. She grabbed at his coat sleeves. "He was so thin. Is he even thinner? He's stopped eating, hasn't he? I hear they force-feed—"

"No, Jo . . ."

"They turned me away!" She jerked from him. "I must go to him! He'll respond to me!"

"Jo!" He clasped her shoulders, his voice suddenly a whisper. "Theo's dead."

"N-no. I was just there! Just tried to see him." Her chest pinched.

"I'm so sorry, Net."

At the sound of her childhood nickname, Jo's breathing stopped.

Theo couldn't be dead.

She'd just gotten started being a wife, married only twenty-two months. Madame Smethe was coming this afternoon for Jo's next cookery lesson. Just yesterday, their new gas cooker had been hooked up in the kitchen. She felt swindled. She'd planned to fry the first steak on it for him.

She sucked in a breath.

*Vincentje will never know his father.*

Twisting her arms from Dries's grip, she picked up the miniature double portraiture with single photos of her and Theo side by side. His dear face gazed from the oval frame. Even though she'd tried to tame his unruly bangs by wetting them down, his hair had rebelled, swooping in a wild wave above his laughing eyes. The image blurred. Dropping the portraiture,



*On a research trip for the book in 2019, I spied a plaque outside the window of Jo and Theo's apartment on the third floor of cite Pigalle No. 8. The English translation of the French sign is "In this house lived Theo van Gogh, brother of Vincent van Gogh, during the months before his death." No mention of Jo.*



*Wedded in 1889, Jo and Theo had been married less than two years when Theo died. A year earlier, their son Vincent Willem was born on January 31, 1890. He is named after Theo's brother, Vincent. The baby was just shy of a year old when Theo passed away on January 25, 1891, making Jo a widow and single parent at just 29 years old.*

she gripped the chair for support.

"I'm not ready for this."

Dries pressed a handkerchief into her hand. "Do you feel faint? Do you need to lie down?"

She shook her head. What difference would taking to her bed make?

"The asylum sent me the telegram yesterday."

She blinked. "Wait . . . you? Why not—"

"Come now! Remember how depressed you were after the baby. Pa insisted that I be their contact."

"But this news . . ." It was true that she'd struggled for a time after Vincentje had been born. Theo had delayed writing to her about his brother's death until the day after he passed away. Wasn't this just like Pa to take over? Wanting to protect his favorite daughter. Shielding her from bad news.

Fresh tears welled up. But no one could protect her from this.

Swiping at her eyes, she whispered, "Some part of me knew it, Dries. I couldn't sleep last night. And the baby. He was fidgety. He felt it too."

"Theo had a seizure. Fell unconscious. He died in his sleep."

She stared at the crumpled handkerchief twisted in her hands. She should have been with Theo. How could she have let him die alone? A rivulet of tears slipped to her jaw.

"Pa sent me his instructions this morning." He reached inside his coat for a telegram. "Funeral at Soestbergen Cemetery in Utrecht on Monday. Jo's train ticket. Moving arrangements," he read.

Jo's stomach churned. "So far away . . . Utrecht must be four hundred kilometers from here. How will I visit . . .?" She couldn't say it: *Theo's grave*.

"It's Pa's decision."

"Wait . . . Pa knows?" She looked at Dries, confused. Theo had only just died.

"I sent a telegram as soon as I heard."

"Last night?"

Dries frowned. "No, I told you *yesterday* morning. Come, Jo. This is a shock. You need to lie down." Dries reached for her, but Jo stood up, pushing him away. He was the one confused, not her.

"I do *not* need to lie down. You *kept* the news of Theo's death from me? You told Pa before me? I am Theo's *wife*." She was shaking.

"Theo was my best friend! You're not the only one who is grieving here."

She blinked down at him, eyes streaming. "Oh, Dries. *Was*. I was Theo's wife."

"Net . . ." He stood up to reach for her again, but she stepped back.

"Wait. You took the time to send a telegram to Pa before telling *me*?" Her anger surged. Her hand jerked back.

Dries caught her wrist. "Don't you dare scold! We're looking out for you. You know we had to make arrangements. You know how you are. It's a wonder

Jo had a history of taking to her bed with illness. In a letter to Theo on July 22, 1890, she wrote, "this tiresome indisposition has kept me from doing anything except dressing and undressing the child." On a visit to her family in Amsterdam with the six-month-old baby Jo wrote to Theo that her mother and sisters "keep nagging me about being frail." When Vincent died on July 29, 1890, Theo delayed writing Jo until the day after his brother's death, following the advice of a doctor who warned it would be better not to upset Jo because it could disrupt her breastfeeding.



*Theo's grave would lay in the Soestbergen Cemetery in Utrecht for 24 years. In 1914, Jo would move Theo's remains to lay next to Vincent's in the cemetery in Auvers-sur-Oise where the graves can be found today blanketed under a covering of ivy.*

you're standing. You always take to bed at the earliest sign of . . . upset."

Jo yanked out of his grip. Her thoughts tumbled. "I . . . I . . . need to contact Theo's mother."

"Calm down. It's done, of course. And Pa secured the gravesite in the Van Gogh plot last month."

Last month?

Jo's chest tightened. Of course Pa had. With grim efficiency, he'd planned for her husband's *death*. Jo collapsed into the chair, splayed her fingers across her face, and sobbed.

Later that afternoon, Dries set a cup of steaming tea in front of Jo on a cleared desk area. She fiddled to straighten the edges of the nearest stack of mail. The letters were hers now.

"Take a sip?" Dries leaned against the edge of a crate. He peered at her. "I need some information, Jo."

She nodded, reaching for the cup. Instead of giving her the useless cookery lesson, Madame Smethe had taken the baby out for a walk in his carriage. She and Dries should talk before they came back. Feeling drained, Jo struggled to take hold of her shame. All this time, she'd been unaware of how delusional she was. Her distraction—no, her ignorance—had squandered time with Theo. She should have insisted on seeing him, stayed in Utrecht, kept a closer eye, and asked more questions. She had acted like a little girl. No wonder Pa and Dries had taken over. She dropped the teacup untasted back into its saucer. She had failed to be there for Theo when he'd suffered. The least she could do was to pull herself together now.

Her voice was rough. "Who . . . who do I pay for the gravesite?"

Dries cocked an eye at her. "Pa took care of it . . . Jo, do you have any idea how much money Theo had?"

She hesitated. Of course, she posted their daily housekeeping expenses in their account book and had helped Theo track sales, but it hadn't occurred to her to tally them up. Theo always did that. She shook her head.

"As I expected."

Blinking, Jo willed her tears not to start again. "Theo had investments." She hesitated, trying to recall. "I've been living off of Theo's paychecks—Boussod's continued them even while Theo's been . . . sick." It was the one decent thing Boussod & Valadon could do after making Theo's life so miserable managing their Montmartre art gallery. Theo had been forced to use his own funds to buy paintings he believed in, despite the disapproval of his director, Georges Raulf. So disdainful of Theo's taste. There must've been at least a dozen paintings from Theo's own collection there—works by Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and a sculpture by Auguste Rodin. She pressed a handkerchief to her eyes. "And there's Theo's personal collection at the gallery."

"And you've inherited all of this . . ." His arm swept across the salon.

The rough containers squeezed in on her, crowding her up and out of her



*Born only seventeen months apart, Andries Bonger (1861 – 1936), or "Dries," and Jo were close as siblings. In the early 1880's Dries lived in Paris where he met Theo at the Hollandsche Club and they became close friends. About Theo, Dries wrote to his parents, ". . .he is the most likeable of the people I have mingled with in Paris. He is a charming companion." In the summer of 1885, Dries and Theo visited each other's families. On August 7, Theo met Jo at the Bonger family home. Later he would confess it was love at first sight.*



*On a rainy day in October 2019, a local tour guide took my husband and me on a walking tour through Montmartre, a haven for artists in the 1890s with its cheap rents and bohemian vibe. We took refuge from the rain in a small building adjacent to the Montmartre museum. Inside we came across a looped video showcasing the many Impressionist artists who had lived nearby. Imagine our surprise — in the line-up of artists, Theo's photo appeared. He was the only art dealer included, and so recognized even today as a true friend to the artists and advocate for modern art.*

chair. At least three hundred paintings here. Drawings and lithographs too. All unsold. Theo had left these to her care. The realization sent a shock. These containers didn't hold even half of Vincent's work. Panicked, she furrowed her brow, fighting to concentrate. The paintings Vincent had done in Auvers-sur-Oise were stored at Père Tanguy's in the attic above his paint shop. A café in Arles had the work Vincent had done in the south of France. Where else? At least half a dozen other small art dealers across Paris. Were there one hundred more paintings? Two hundred? What had Theo been thinking to die like he had? She couldn't be responsible. Theo had known where all his brother's artwork was. She had no clue.

"Steady, Net." Dries pulled her back into the chair. "Theo's inheritance is split equally between you and Vincentje. He'll get his portion when he turns twenty-five." He scanned the wooden crates. "Not that there's much here. Vincent painted so much—and poor Theo never made a sale."

"A few. One last winter."

"What's that?"

"Theo sold *The Red Vineyard* to Anna Boch, Eugène Boch's sister."

Dries looked blank.

"He's the artist who became Vincent's friend when Vincent first came to Paris. There's a portrait of Eugène Boch . . . somewhere here." She cast about the crates. ". . . a poet." She recalled the portrait's otherworldly background of twinkling stars. Her racing pulse began to slow. Theo had commented that it suggested Boch's imagination, but she hadn't needed the explanation. The painting's feeling of transcendence was self-evident.

"Not a *serious* collector, then," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"His sister bought it.

Dries didn't know what he was talking about. Theo had had his share of society ladies come to the gallery, one hand on their husband's elbow, acting demure while shrewdly selecting some of the better art to coax their husbands into purchases. Theo had liked to say his sales were apolitical—the value of a franc was the same whether an aristocrat or member of the bourgeoisie paid it, whether a man or woman. Every sale had counted toward his annual bonus.

His bonus.

"Theo's bonus is paid in the spring. I need to contact Boussod to see if I can get the payment now."

"How important . . . ?"

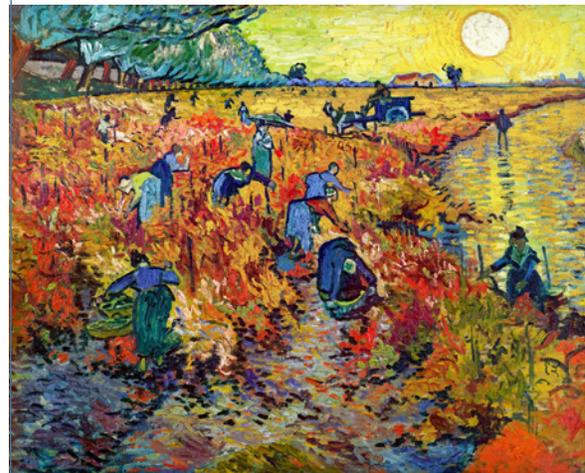
"It was double Theo's salary last year."

He swallowed. "Well then, I'll have to take care of it."

"Let me do it."

"Absolutely not, Net. Art traders are bullies. And of all the top dealers, Boussod is the worst."

"I know how horrible they are. Theo tried to break from them, remember?"



*Prior to selling The Red Vineyard, Theo had sold a handful of Vincent's paintings, but specifics of those sales are lost. Anna Boch bought this painting for 400 francs at a show that ran from January 28 to February 23, 1889, at the VII Exposition of the Vingt group in Brussels. Anna's brother, Eugène Boch, is immortalized in a portrait Vincent painted titled Eugène Boch ("the poet").*

**Theo's employer, Boussod, Valadon & Cie, were international art dealers, known as Goupil & Cie until 1884. The Van Gogh family had a history of employment with it. Vincent van Gogh, Uncle "Cent" (1820 – 1888) was named a partner of Goupil in 1858. (His wife was Cornelia Carpentus, or "Aunt Cornelia" (1829 – 1913) who gave Jo and Theo a piano as a wedding gift.) In 1869, Vincent (the artist) became a junior apprentice at Goupil's dealership in The Hague. Eventually, he would bounce to London and then the Paris headquarters before leaving Goupil for good. In 1873, Theo took a job with Goupil in Brussels. He would move permanently to Paris in November 1879 and ultimately manage its Montmartre location.**

When you backed out of owning a gallery with him?" She couldn't stop the taunt. She wanted him to hurt.

"You have *no clue* what it's like to be in commerce."

"In fact, I do." Her mouth suddenly dry, she reached for the tea. "I—I sent some of Vincent's drawings to the Vingt's annual show."

"In Brussels? The deadline was months ago."

"I wrote to Director Maus, asked if we could send pen-and-ink drawings."

"You can't have. Theo was too confused. He couldn't possibly—"

"I sent the drawing titled *Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum*. Theo loved that one. And others." Her head bent. How ironic that Theo had been in an asylum.

"It's an annual show for *paintings*, Net. The Vingt men pride themselves on being at the forefront of avant-garde art."

"*I know that*. Theo told me how they showed Vincent's oils in the past. That's why I reached out when I realized we missed the entry date."

"Come on. You shouldn't have gotten involved with that. And in the middle of Theo's breakdown!"

How could she explain that the notion had come out of the blue?

The thought had been vivid even in the whirlpool of frantic worry over Theo. The idea had been impetuous, uncharacteristically spontaneous, scribbling a quick telegram to Director Maus without consulting anyone. It was a little concept—inconsequential, really. Nothing to get so wound up about. But she'd counted on Theo's assurance—his confidence in her acting on her own—when he returned.

Now she'd never know if she'd been right.

She picked up the portraiture at her feet and stared at her innocent face. How naïve she'd been. Even in the terrible months as Theo's illness had worsened and she'd struggled in constant exhaustion caring for him and the baby—even then, she'd never imagined their beautiful partnership could end. But now . . . Vincentje's parenting. Their cozy Paris apartment. Theo's lifelong work to showcase Vincent's art. Her tender companionship with Theo—all of this would dissolve once she moved under Pa's roof. Dismay rose from deep within her, yet for once, her eyes were dry. It was time to face the fact that her fairy-tale life had come to an end.

Still, she craved to take hold of one thing, just one last thing, before she said goodbye forever to her life with Theo. The bonus proved Theo's love for her and Vincentje. It was hers.

With sudden ferocity, Jo grabbed her brother's arm. "I'm claiming the bonus."

He tugged at her grip. "My god, you're impossible." He paused. "Braver than me."

"I'm Theo's wife."

"Theo's . . ." His eyes softened. "Oh, Net, let's get through the funeral first."

He caught her when she let go. She'd misspoken again.



*Vincent drew Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum when he lived at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum, recovering from a mental breakdown. During his year-long stay, it's estimated he produced 150 to 200 artworks. Once completed (and dry), he would roll up the artwork to send to Theo in Paris. In a January 8, 1890, letter to Vincent, Theo references this drawing:*

*"In one of the rolls [of paintings] there was also a superb pen drawing of a fountain in a garden."*

*It would become one of Theo's favorites.*

I don't know how to express this, but it feels as if my real life is only about to begin —as if everything up to now has been merely a rehearsal from which I hope both of us will benefit. I know perfectly well that it's not like a novel: they marry and live happily ever after — but that it will also be difficult at times. We shall just have to see that we get through them together.

— Jo to Theo, Amsterdam  
March 22, 1889

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*Saving Vincent, A Novel of Jo van Gogh* will publish April 2025!

Thank you!

Joan

#### SOURCES

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