

BETWEEN YESTERDAY & TOMORROW

by Charmaine Pauls

*For Alban, Kean, and Chiara,
for their unconditional love.*

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PROLOGUE

The beginning of one's life doesn't necessarily start with one's birth.

To begin with, it happened in a place where I didn't belong, with the passing away of my estranged grandmother. Like dead compost germinates a dormant seed, I started to grow, to flower, to be born, to shoot roots into the soil of France—a non-indigenous plant in foreign *terre*; an alien tree that magically unrolls its leaves, unlocks its power, in a potion of fertilizer.

Down to earth as I may have been, when I invaded this so-very-old, so-very-passionate, so-very-ripe country with my green soul, I was destined to make some enemies, the front line being my estranged family. My family was nothing like a rose garden; rather, it was a forest of pines that from afar, looked like a green goose-feather down. Up close and personal, it stung the flesh of the naked spirit. It was a maze in which to be deceived and to lose your way and yourself.

Without the wisdom that comes to some lucky ones with age, I arrived inexperienced, like an unpeeled onion, with layers of hidden tears. That was all. That was me. I arrived. I never guessed that I was exposing myself to be shredded to the core; to become just the root of a child, growing into ivy that attached itself to the very stone walls of my heartless inheritance.

All I had were my backpack and the courage plastered on my unpainted face. Torn jeans, torn soul, piercings, and tattoo—like my family chateau, it was all show. Because for eight years, my birthday candles had been blown out by the cold breath of death, until just a frosted layer of me remained, like icing on an untouched, spoilt cake. And then death struck again. Had I known, I might not have ventured into the new domain, which, from then on, I could have called home.

Why I came here, I never really knew. Maybe because my soul was slowly dying, like a plant that went unwatered, through neglect or forgetfulness. Maybe because my body was burned out, like a cooking fire that had served its purpose; its smoldering ashes all that remain of the feast. Maybe because I didn't have anyone to leave behind, to miss, to miss me. Maybe because I wanted to know who my mother was. But it wasn't because I was hopeful. I wasn't the kind of person who hoped. It wasn't that I was curious, because nothing intrigued me. It wasn't that I needed a holiday, because I wasn't the type of person who took holidays. Maybe I just didn't know. And in the end, it didn't really matter. What mattered was that I was a dry, purposeless tree, without a green branch or leaf on which an animal could feed, not asking for as much as a drop of water, not offering an iota of shade. But I learned that in one season, even a dying tree could be revived with water. In four months, a lifetime could be lived. In eight years, a lifetime that had never been lived could be lost.

Everyone has a story to tell. I never thought mine was worth telling. Sometimes I have difficulty telling stories because I cannot picture the beginning or the end. Lately, as time has moved me to the last quarter of my life, I'm starting to see more clearly the outlines of the end. The beginning still eludes me, maybe because when I was young and pretty and arrogant, life had no end and no starting point. After my life's tragic course, I never heeded the future, only the past. Until David arrived.

So, I guess the best place to start is in the middle, somewhere between the vague clouds of change, because, in fact, that was the beginning, so to speak. Some of what flows from my pen comes from my diary, some from memory, but I will try to tell it as accurately as possible, exclusive of my emotions, as it really happened.

CHAPTER 1

France

I was three months old when my mother left us. We never saw her again. I grew up with my father on a game farm in the Northwest Province of South Africa. A divorce came through when I was two. My mother was Anglo-French, from the south of France. Besides her nationality, I didn't know anything about her. It broke my father's heart to talk about her. Through my uncle, I later learned that she was living with a Brazilian football player in South America. My maternal grandmother had cut us off from the family. Why, I didn't know, except that my mother left France with my South African father when she was pregnant with me, before they were married.

I was thirty when my grandmother passed away. The first time she made contact with me was after her death, through her will. A lawyer traced me, through my uncle, to inform me that my grandmother had left her entire estate near Castries, France, to me. In the first years of my working career, after my father's death, I had tried several times to find my mother. Tracing her seemed impossible, especially without resources. Tracing my grandmother was easier, but her second husband, Yves Dubois, had replied to my e-mail, instructing me not to contact them again. I suppose I would have tried harder if the next few years of my life had not been dominated by other tragic events. Through the years, finding my mother became less important to me. I was obviously not important to her. But nine years later, within a week of the news from my grandmother's lawyer, I put my business on hold and took a plane to Montpellier, via Paris. I had no idea what to expect. The lawyer had explained that a decision had to be made with regard to the estate, a decision that would affect the lives of the people still living there. And, being in Montpellier made me feel a few thousand miles closer to my mother, even if only in getting to know the place where she had once lived.

The airport in Montpellier was small, modern, and disappointingly ugly. It felt like a bad omen. I noted everything—the squareness, the whiteness—because it was new to me. Upon leaving the safe comfort of the air-conditioned arrival-and-departure hall, I was hit in the stomach by a sudden rush of unforeseen panic along with the smothering summer heat. It had been so long since I had allowed this emotion in my life that it almost also seemed new to me. For years, I had succeeded so well in creating a stable, predictable flat-line pattern of living that sudden rushes of emotion felt foreign and frightening, like the new place and its heat that enfolded me. A thermometer next to a clock on the wall read thirty-eight degrees Celsius. I had left Johannesburg in the height of an unusually cold June. The Mediterranean heat in southern France felt intolerable.

Fumbling in my pocket, I found the folded e-mail printout with the address of the country house. I scanned the small crowd outside, not knowing how to recognize the person who was there to fetch me. I felt foolish for not arranging it more wisely. In my haste to depart, I hadn't thought it through. I had had a very short telephone conversation with Yves Dubois, informing him of my visit, which, I could tell by his tone despite the miles that separated us, was not so welcome. A tour operator with a board and an agency's name scribbled on it ushered tourists to a minibus. Some young, unshaven men smoked next to the garbage can, and a couple kissed and hugged happily. I was totally alone.

“Mademoiselle Marlien?”

The mention of my name so close to the back of my neck made me jump, giving away a little of my hidden insecurity. Turning around slowly, I managed to smile. In front of me was a short, dark man, with thick, black hair washing over his forehead and curling just above his ears, wearing very dirty jeans, a faded blue T-shirt, and a big, welcoming smile. The little, forced smile on my face gave him his answer even before I did, so he continued in his French, tinted with a very strong southern accent. My French dated back to my high school years and with very little practice for the past twelve years, I had to concentrate hard to understand him.

“Welcome to France! Did you have a good trip? Not too tired? I'm Vincent Leclerc. Monsieur Yves sent me to fetch you to the house. Come, come. Let me take your bag.”

Without expecting or waiting for responses to his questions, he ushered me past the tourist group to the parking lot where he dropped my

only piece of luggage into the back of an old green Peugeot 106. I had packed lightly, not caring much about dressing in pretty clothes. I was still digging into my memory store of polite phrases for something to say, and then trying to translate it into French, when we sped dangerously fast for such a small car down a double-lane highway lined by trees that threw jail-like bars of shadows over the tar road. I felt trapped. I started to doubt my decision to come.

Vincent seemed content with the silence in the car, opening the window and busying himself with lighting a cigarette. He looked at me as if seeing me sitting next to him for the first time, and held out the pack. “Want one?”

“No thanks. I don't smoke.”

“Good. They say this stuff kills you.” He gave a horse-like laugh, blowing smoke through thin lips. He looked at me, squinting his eyes against the noon sunlight. “So, you're Madame May's granddaughter. I can see the resemblance. My condolences for your grandmother. She was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. The people in the village loved her. So much, they even forgave her for being English. And here, even someone from Paris is a foreigner.”

It was the first time in my life that anyone had told me that I looked like someone, and it caught my attention. I wanted to know more.

“Yves said that you are the estate manager. Have you worked there for long?”

“It depends on what you consider long. Fifteen years. Monsieur Yves employed me when the previous manager retired. It was my first job. He was good enough to give me a chance to prove myself.”

“Oh.” It was hard to hide my disappointment. It meant that he hadn't met my mother. She left France before I was born. “Are you originally from this area, Vincent?”

“From Sète. My father was a fisherman. Really pretty village not far from here. You'll like it if you have the time to visit it.”

“Did you know any of my family before you started working for Yves?”

“Sorry, no. Never met any of them before I started working at Le Bon Soleil.” He kept his eyes on the road and his voice steady when he said carefully, “Monsieur Yves naturally told me about your grandmother's will. Any idea of what you want to do?”

I shook my head. “I'm not going to make any hasty decisions. I realize that everyone must be very concerned about the future, including you. For the moment, I just want to take some time to familiarize myself with the details. It all came as a bit of a shock to me.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine.”

“So what exactly do you do?”

“I look after the property, kind of general handyman, driver, you know?” He gave me a sidelong smile. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, but it had always been difficult for me to guess people’s ages. “I guess I should call you boss now,” he teased. “You should know that Yves is not the easiest man in the world. He’s a tough one. But don’t be put off too quickly. If he trusts someone he will be loyal to them forever.” He gave a wink and flipped some ash out his window. “What about your family back home?”

“It’s just me.”

“No husband? No children?” he asked when I didn’t elaborate for several seconds.

“Nope, just me. I had a cat back home, but I had to give him to a neighbor. Didn’t think he would appreciate the voyage. How about you? Any family?”

His eyes brightened with a happy light. “A boy, David. He is five.”

“A wife?”

“She died in childbirth,” he said matter-of-factly.

Something in me stirred, like a touch on the string of a violin, resonating into the air, and I was afraid that it could be heard, be seen, be touched. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. Life is what it is. You’ll meet David soon. Another twenty minutes and we’ll arrive.”

We fell silent. I wanted to ask all kinds of questions about the house, the land, the people, my family whom I had never met, but the flight had exhausted me. At the same time, I started drifting into the beauty of the landscape that surrounded us. It startled me—not the beauty, but the fact that I found it beautiful. Nothing either inside or outside of my home city had appealed to me for years. On the road to Castries, poppy fields tinted with blood-red flowers stretched out around us for as far as the eye could see. The sky was a turquoise blue and the land so flat that I could see the road disappear into a distant field dotted with purple wildflowers. I could see why Van Gogh became so inspired there. We were following a road running close to the coast and I could see the still Mediterranean Sea and the moors that connected it to the mainland like giant puzzle pieces. There were flocks of flamingos on mirrors of flat water, their upside-down silhouettes making for postcard-perfect pictures. I sat upright when I saw white horses grazing in the meadows.

Vincent, seeing my interest, stubbed out his cigarette in the car ashtray, explaining, “These are the wild horses of Camargue. You like horses?”

“I love horses, not that I can ride or anything that worthy.”

“Monsieur Yves still keeps a few horses in the stables. Maybe you’ll get a chance to learn.”



All too soon, we curved off the main road onto a narrow little road with no signs. It was guarded on both sides by enormous plane trees, their tops shaped like the gnarled and menacing fingers of gigantic witch hands. The red and purple fields gave way to cultivated patches of sunflowers; the vegetation became greener and the landscape more hilly. After crossing an old stone bridge wide enough for just one car, we turned onto a gravel road that was framed by a mountain on the left and a river on the right.

I will never forget the first time I laid eyes on Le Bon Soleil. A cluster of trees crowded around a curve in the river, the green fur of the trees flowing up and spreading out to the hill like water, becoming a broadening delta of forest. And there, next to the curve, balanced on steep rocks that broke off into the river and huddled among trees was a house, a little chateau in the southern countryside. It astonished and frightened me. My mental image was of a simple farmhouse, neat and square, white with a red-tile roof. Reality was quite different. Two towers with cone-shaped roofs stood tall above the trees, but the rest of the ivy-covered stone walls were hidden until we had passed two massive, black iron gates supported on both sides by a six-foot wall that ran around the property. On top of the iron gates, “Le Bon Soleil” was welded in iron, with the design of a sun worked into the center of the gate, its rays snaking outwards in eight arms that stopped at the gate hinges and lock. In front of the house stood a big fountain, the road a circle around it. The front garden consisted only of green lawn that spread out from both sides of the house, running into the pine woods on the left and cut short by the small cliff on the right. All of this was mine. I battled to digest the realization.

The welcoming committee consisted of an old lady and a young boy who emerged from the huge, carved, wooden double doors. They waited patiently at the top of the steps for the car to park in the driveway in front of the house.

“*Voilà,*” Vincent got out and grabbed my backpack from the back seat. “*Bienvenue.*”

A liver-and-white pointer came dashing around the corner of the house, ears and tail flapping, pinning two fluffy paws onto the passenger side of the car, and her bark drew three other pointers.

“Artemis, *sort!*” shouted Vincent before pushing the dog away with one knee and opening the door for me.

I didn’t have enough time to take in the enormity or the imposing façade of the mansion, because from that moment on all my attention was fixed on the boy. A strikingly beautiful little miniature of a handsome man, he looked old for his age. Thick brown curls framed his angular face. He had the clearest green eyes that I had ever seen. There was something very vulnerable about his thin legs and arms. He first smiled at Vincent and when he looked at me, his eyes seemed to rest on me in the most peculiar way.

“*Je vous présente* Marlien. Marlien, this is Marie-Hélène, our housekeeper, and this is David,” said Vincent.

Without moving his eyes away from me or blinking, David slowly pointed a finger at me and then said a name that knocked the wind out of my sails: “Paul.”

Vincent must have seen me falter on the steps from the corner of his eye, for he offered an arm and brushed away his son’s comment nonchalantly. “David is...special, Marlien,” he said in a soft voice. “David, *elle s’appelle* Marlien.”

But David’s eyes were fixed on the hollow air beside me, and in the vacuum of the non-welcoming reception, he echoed the name again.

Vincent left my side to run his hand through the boy’s brown curls. “Yves is in town on business. He’ll be back for lunch. Well, Marie-Hélène will take over now, as she’s in charge of the house.” He winked in her direction, which invited a very unladylike snort from her. “We have a lot of errands to run, don’t we David? Ready for your horseback riding?”

Vincent, the boy and the dogs disappeared around the side of the house. I still found myself dizzy and disorientated, faced with the French housekeeper who was looking at the little lump that was my luggage and ironing a disapproving look over the length of me before she sighed, “This way, then. I’ll show you to your room.”

My bedroom was upstairs in the west tower, bordering on the forest. The east side had a view over the river, but Marie-Hélène told me that it was damp and mosquito-ridden in summer. A huge four-poster bed was fitted with lilac organza curtains pulled back with silk cords twisted

into floral posies with bead flowers. The room was octagonal and less spacious than the other rooms on the first floor. Looking down from the bay window on the north side, I could see the garden out back stretching from a maze to a vast field of green grass that melted into the distant forest of pine trees. From the south window lay a view of the road leading up to the house and the fountain below. I was happy to hear the barking of the dogs, breaking the odd, dead silence in the house, although I could not see them.

From the southwest corner of the room a stone staircase spiraled into the tower. It was another octagonal room, but very tiny, with a small fireplace, a sheepskin rug on the floor and a simple divan, a coffee table, and a writing desk. The couch faced the fireplace and the desk the only small window on the north side. Bookshelves filled with books that looked dusty and unread lined the walls. My room and its mirror image on the east side were the only ones that did not have fireplaces, just the modern central-heating system that I later saw had been installed throughout the house. Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I wondered how anyone could need a heating system in a place like this.

As if reading my mind, Marie-Hélène finally broke the silence. “Just wait and see, it gets really cold in winter. Especially when the rainy season starts. That door there leads to the bathroom.” She pointed to a door between the north window and a small sliding door to a balcony.

Peeking in, I saw an old ball-and-claw bathtub with a shower fitted inside, a broad white basin, and modern toilet.

“Washing is in that basket over there. I empty it every morning before nine, sharp. Otherwise, it will have to wait for the next day. If it’s not in the basket it’s not being washed.”

I wondered why she was addressing me like a child. My feet were swollen from the long flight and the heat. I flipped my backpack onto the bed and sat down to remove my hiking boots.

“I’ve put clean sheets on the bed. There are towels in the bathroom. If you need anything from town, you can leave a list with me. We go every other day during the week, but not on weekends. Don’t forget, everything here is closed on Sundays. Some shops don’t open on Mondays, and most are closed between twelve and four, so plan your shopping lists in advance. Some of our guests have found themselves stranded without money or necessities like medicine because they’re not used to the hours we keep here.

“I’ll leave you to explore the house, then. Lunch is at one, sharp. As you can see, we are slightly understaffed—we use a cleaning team that

only comes in twice a week—so there won't be a guided tour, but you may as well start to make yourself at home." She turned at the door. As an afterthought, she added, "This was your mother's room." Her voice was steady, emotionless.

I looked around with new eyes. Were these the things that my mother chose when she lived in the house? Decorating her bedroom in a very tender, ladylike fashion, dreaming in this bed about her future, her children, her lover, my father?

"She hated it," Marie-Hélène said flatly. With that, she went through the door and didn't even turn when I muttered, "*Merci*."

I followed Marie-Hélène's suggestion and walked through the quiet house. Upstairs were six bedrooms, each with its own private bathroom and living room. The four large ones faced each other across a wide hallway, and the two, smaller, east and west tower rooms were at the ends of the hallway. In the center, separating the west-side bedrooms and tower room from the east-side ones, was an elaborate ballroom of one hundred square meters, illuminated by ceiling-to-floor stained-glass windows on both the north and south sides. Whereas one big balcony on the back of the house connected the two north-facing bedrooms and the ballroom, the towers had their own separate balconies just big enough for a little wrought iron table and two chairs, with ornate, waist-high walls. The bedrooms in front, overlooking the road leading up to the house had no balconies. I ventured downstairs.

The huge entrance hall with its arched staircase dominated the ground floor. To the left, or west side, was the formal parlor, the dining room, the informal parlor that Yves referred to as the reading room, the study, a television room that used to be the old cigar room, the guest bathroom, a wine cellar, and a bar fitted into the sun room on the back patio in recent years. The east side mostly housed the rooms necessary for the day-to-day running of the house—the big kitchen with its old-fashioned fireplace; the pantry; the washing-up room; the laundry and ironing room; a cold room; and a little apartment with a bedroom, parlor, and bathroom that was occupied by Marie-Hélène.

The decoration was theatrical: heavy, over-sized, velvet curtains ballooning out onto the granite floors; rich tapestries in shades of burgundy; full-size oil paintings of ancestors; dark, carved wood furniture and ornamental sofas. It was both impressive and vulgar, intriguing and menacing. Later I discovered that it was my grandmother who had re-furnished the house with her grandiose taste for the Renaissance style. Shabby-chic French lamps with ostrich-feather trimmings in ruby red

and black threw their hollow light into the vastness of the formal living room. Crystal chandeliers hung heavy from the high ceilings and reflected their rainbow-like light against the raw, stone walls. The most impressive fireplace was in the living room. It was no less than three meters long, framed by creamy granite in which several angels were carved. Persian carpets adorned the floors. I could just imagine the fortune that my grandmother had spent on interior decorating. All in all, *Le Bon Soleil* was a spectacular piece of work dating from the seventeenth century and it was in immaculate condition, apparently thanks to my grandmother. It had been in my maternal French grandfather, Gautier de le Croix's, family for two centuries until my English grandmother inherited it after his death.

I soon discovered that the house had a heartbeat of its own. Its imposing pulse sent ripples into the air that left me feeling slightly cold in the midday heat. The sound of the old clock amplified the heavy silence in the dining room. The television room had the smell of an old cinema. It was the only room in the house where the stone walls were plastered and covered with gold-and-cream wallpaper. Like the odor of spilled drinks and popcorn tends to attach itself to the walls and curtains and seats and carpets of a movie house, the room reminded me of stories—memories embedded into the very fabric of the wallpaper. I wondered if an outsider could ever become a real part of that.

The richness of it all, the insanity, the fear that pricked at my toughened heart made it difficult to breathe. I wanted to escape the damp smell of the foreign stone walls, the ash fragrance of the fireplace in which I had never seen a fire, and more than anything, the memory that the little boy David had evoked in me.

I found a double door that opened onto a huge, covered terrace running across the length of the house at the back. When I left the silence and the cool air of the television room behind me, the summer heat was suddenly a welcome awakening to reality. Closing the door of the house—my house—that was decorated like a stage, waiting for a play to be acted out between its walls, I suddenly felt like an actress who had forgotten her lines.

There were many wooden benches and little tables scattered between pot plants and decorative trees on the patio, but I plopped down on the bottom step to put my bare feet into the green grass, which was surprisingly hard and uncomfortable. Vincent later told me that it was an indigenous, wild grass that didn't need much watering.

There was a gust of wind in the pines on the hill to the north. I was surprised to hear the sound of the rustling from so far. More deafening than that were the voices of the cicada, *la cigale*, an insect that produced its characteristic chirping sound from its abdomen. As I closed my eyes, I could hear their never-ending noise in three dimensions. The sound came in layers, layers in stereo, layers that could be peeled off one by one. It came from the east, the west, up high, down below, from far and from near, and the more I focused on the noise, the more my other senses started to shut down, until just the eeriness of the little insects invaded my soul.

In the shuffle of the cicada and the wind, another distant beat started drumming in my ear. The drumming became a tune, the tune became a word, and as I turned my head to catch a glimpse of what was materializing, it became a whisper as clear as the cutting blades of the grass under my feet. “Paul, Paul, Paul.” I pressed my hands to my temples and shut my eyes. Was I going mad? It had been so long since I had thought about him. I almost thought I had forgotten. But how could I? How could I ever?

A shadow moved over the skins of my eyes, eclipsing the red glow of the sun in my inner eyelids. Becoming aware of a presence, I flicked open my eyes. David was standing in front of me, the dog called Artemis by his side. He had a pretty smile on his face and he was watching me intently, as was the dog, his head cocked a little to the side. He wore blue shorts and a mismatched green T-shirt at least one size too small. Dearthness overwhelmed me. Did he miss his mother like I did? Did his father dress him, not having any sense of how to match colors so that a handsome little five-year-old looked as happy and sweet as he was supposed to, or did he dress himself, no mother’s hand available to button his shirts, to show him with loving patience how to tie a shoelace?

My hands fell lamely into my lap. I had no idea how to talk to children. “Hello, David.”

He didn’t answer, but just continued smiling.

“David!” A long call came from around the corner of the house. It was a voice that I didn’t recognize.

Artemis seemed to get impatient to continue to wherever they were headed. She tripped around David, playfully tugging at his T-shirt and wagging her tail.

“What’s her name?” I pointed to the dog, trying to make small talk. Still, he only smiled.

“Do you understand me?” I asked very slowly in my best, possible French. “I know—my accent is very bad.”

“Daaaavid!” This time the voice was nearer and as both the dog and I looked up, a very handsome man in beige trousers and a white, long-sleeved, linen shirt rounded the corner. Gray touched the raven black of his fringe and sideburns, and his skin was darkly tanned.

As he approached us with a relaxed stride, he said, “David, there you are. Where did you run off to?” He ran a hand through his thick, damp hair. “You must be Marlien,” he said as if it was the most natural thing in the world to find me there, sitting on the back terrace. Bending down, he kissed me three times on the cheeks. “I’m Jean-Christophe. Welcome to Le Bon Soleil. Yves told me that you were arriving today. I’m sorry about your grandmother.”

“Oh, thank you, yes.” I must have looked a bit baffled, but he only smiled. His stare was fixed on my mouth and after several seconds I lifted my fingers to my lips, as if to wipe away some crumbs.

Seeing the action, he broke the silence. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. It’s just, you have the most beautiful mouth. Well, face. Eyes. But your mouth. You have the smile of the Mona Lisa. It should be captured on canvass.”

I felt myself turning red and wanted to look away, but couldn’t. His eyes held mine.

When he saw my discomfort he apologized again. “Now I’ve made you blush. Don’t worry. You’ll get used to me. I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m outspoken.” When I still couldn’t answer, he put his arm around David and changed the subject. “So Yves is your grandfather?” It was a rhetorical question. “Would never have imagined.”

“Well, he is not technically my grandfather. He is my step-grandfather. Do you...work here, too?”

“I guess you could say that I also kind of work here, too.” Instead of relieving me of my embarrassing, stupid, questioning look, he leisurely dug into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and as he blew the smoke slowly into the air, he offered the pack to me.

“No thanks, I don’t smoke,” I said for a second time that morning. “Do all French smoke?” I sounded more irritated than I had intended.

“Why? Do all French offer you cigarettes?”

“So far, almost.”

“Smoking is like drinking a good espresso, one of the small pleasures of life.”

Then we were silent, the four of us—David, the dog, Jean-Christophe, and I. I didn't know what else to say, but eventually it was I who broke the silence. "So what do you do?"

"I am a veterinarian."

"So you take care of the dogs, or the cows, or the horses, or whatever it is that they have here?"

He laughed. He had a deep, pleasant voice. "I am a small-animal veterinarian. I take care of the dogs when they need it, yes, but right now they are not sick. I help David with some horseback riding lessons. How about you?"

"Graphic artist." I didn't feel like expanding, or explaining that I always wanted to study fine art, but somehow, like with everything else in my life, ended up with second best for various reasons.

"Graphic artist," he mimed, flicking a long thread of ash onto the grass with a flip of his forefinger. I noticed that he had strong hands. "Sounds very interesting. In what kind of graphic business are you?"

I wasn't sure if he was being genuine or sarcastic. I wouldn't blame him for the latter. Again, I couldn't answer with anything glamorous, like 3D animation.

"I've always focused on advertising. But for the past year I've been running my own company, designing mostly paper-based material." He looked at me questioningly. "You know," I insisted, but when he shook his head I added, "Logos, stationery, newsletters, brochures, posters, calendars, stuff like that."

"Ah-ha." It could have been an expression of approval or disapproval, but I couldn't linger on it too much, not that I cared, because the dog finally ran off on its own and David was pulling Jean-Christophe by the hand.

"David," I reached forward and pushed the brown curls from his eyes, "how old are you?"

He looked at me blankly, not alarmed by my interest, but not excited either.

"He doesn't speak to strangers easily," Jean-Christophe said. He put his cigarette out on the lawn and flipped the butt into the ashtray stand at the bottom of the stairs. "I think I know what you want, David. Is it lunch time, then? Already?" The two of them started to walk past me. "I think we'll have to do the horseback riding after lunch. You coming?"

"I don't ride...can't ride."

"I meant are you coming for lunch?" The amusement was thick in his voice.

Ignoring it, I hesitated between opting for a shower first or listening to the rumblings of my tummy, but remembering Marie-Hélène's strict time reminder, I lingered only another minute before I followed them inside.

As I re-entered through the reading room I could hear male voices coming from the entrance hall. The one voice belonged to Vincent, I was sure, and I was right, because David had already rushed through the open door to greet his dad. Vincent was talking to another, older man, whom I recognized to be Yves Dubois from the photo that the lawyer had e-mailed to me. Their voices echoed in the hollowness of the high-ceilinged hall. As they became aware of me standing quietly, barefoot, on the sideline, they fell quiet. It was Yves who first spoke. His voice was loud and vibrated in emptiness, bouncing off the cold marble floors.

"Well, you look just like your grandmother." It wasn't meant as a compliment.

"I wouldn't know." I met his gaze with equal challenge.

"Marlien." Yves pronounced my name with some difficulty, washing the syllables around in his mouth like he was tasting wine, and then frowning as if finding it sour.

"My grandmother's name, on my father's side."

He gave me a strange look that I couldn't place. "Let's all move to lunch." Yves took Vincent by the arm. "I hope you staying too, Jean-Christophe."

"If there's room for one more..."

"There's always room for more," he started off jovially, and then seemed to check himself as he shot me a glance from under his gray eyebrows.



During the summer months, lunch and dinner were served outside on the big terrace. In winter, a four-seat wooden table in the sun room served the purpose. The dining room, with its long table and sixteen stuffy chairs, was reserved for more formal entertaining, but on that first day, we moved to the dining room, which was dark, the curtains drawn against the heat. I think Yves did it on purpose to intimidate me. He must have instructed Marie-Hélène to cook a welcoming lunch to make me feel right at home, I thought sarcastically, as I stared at the dish in front of me, which contained the head of some kind of animal.

"*Lapin*, my favorite," Yves said smilingly, looking straight at me.

I was a foreigner out of place, not fitting into the history or the culture or the eating habits of the people who surrounded me. I realized that Yves was challenging and measuring me.

“Freshly killed this morning?” I asked dryly.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Yves matched my tone.

Marie-Hélène dished up mashed potatoes and without asking lumped a piece of the meat onto my plate, the head onto Yves’.

Jean-Christophe whispered in my ear, “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Yves, or the rabbit?”

He smiled deeply, his eyes resting on mine, until Yves started pouring the wine.

“So,” Yves continued, “for how long are we being honored with your stay? You weren’t very clear on the phone.” His hair was white, his neatly trimmed moustache and beard framing a determined mouth. He had a well-manicured manner, but soon I would get to know his icy character.

“As long as it takes,” I said, sipping the wine without knowing why I had brought the glass to my lips. It had been a long time since I had touched wine.

“Well, well.” He raised his eyebrows.

“This is as much an inconvenience to me as it probably is to you. I’m not here to make hasty decisions.” I had a feeling that I was going to need a lot more wine to get through lunch.

“Uhm uhm.” Jean-Christophe cleared his throat. “So, Vincent, David and I never got around to the horseback riding before lunch. I arrived late. Emergency at the clinic. I’ve been thinking about taking him out this afternoon. If that’s fine with you. Feel like joining us? We can go down to the river. I understand the fence there needs some mending. Kill two birds with one stone?”

Yves continued like he never heard Jean-Christophe. “You may have your grandmother’s pretty blue eyes, blond hair, her face, but I see you also inherited her unlucky temperament.”

“So, I guess it’s lucky for you she passed away, seeing that she chose to marry a man so much her junior.” I felt bad expressing the clichéd sentiments of the remainder of my scattered and not-so-well-intentioned advisors back home, but I needed a stick, and I hit with the first one that came to mind.

He didn’t remark on my comment, but lashed back with his own insult. “How odd that you left everything in South Africa so easily to join a French family abroad, with no plans.”

“I have a plan,” I lied. “And if I happen to find a job, I may just stay... indefinitely.” It was meant as a threat. I had no intentions of that kind, but I wanted to see the look on his face, since he made it so clear that I was completely unwelcome in my grandmother’s...his...my house.

Jean-Christophe cleared his throat for a second time. “If you want, Marlien, you can join us later at the river. There’s a nice little swimming hole that David adores. It gets really hot out here, so it’s better to leave after four. Sun is too fierce before then. No plans of installing a swimming pool, Yves?”

Yves ignored the question, his eyes cold on me.

When the silence continued it was me who spoke. “Thanks, Jean-Christophe, I was planning on getting over this jet lag first.”

“Nothing better than siesta time.” Vincent was cutting the meat on David’s plate. “We normally break from one until four when it’s too hot to work, then I have a few errands to run, but I can show you around the property at five if you want, Marlien.”

Jean-Christophe and Vincent seemed to be trying to talk over the atmosphere, which could have been cut with a knife. My throat was dry from the red wine and the snake of anger that was creeping up from the pit of my stomach. It surprised me. Anger had abandoned me years ago. Although I was starving, the mixture of emotions and the thought of the lunch on my plate, which had been hopping through the back garden a few hours ago, made me lose my appetite, until all that was left for me to do was to pack the dishwasher with Marie-Hélène. A waterfall of wordlessness crashed over me in the enormous kitchen as I dried the crystal glasses that had to be hand washed, a chore that Marie-Hélène didn’t seem to mind me doing. I wandered off to my bedroom for a shower, wondering where I was and what I was doing there for the hundredth time that day.



After a good, two-hour nap a shower had invigorated me. I obediently left my dirty washing in the bathroom wicker basket. With my skin and hair still damp, I opened the sliding doors and stepped out onto the tiny balcony with its solitary plant to allow the sun to breeze over me like the soft movement of the organza curtains in the slight, hot whisper of a wind. In the distance, I could see David and Jean-Christophe approaching on horseback from the dense pines. I watched them approach until they were within earshot.

“*Salut!*” Jean-Christophe waved his hat up at me. “Too hot to ride now. We’re going to give it a break. Come down to the river with us.”

“Don’t you have some sheep or rabbits or farm animals to attend to? You should be saving the rabbits, you know.” It sounded much cockier than what I intended.

“They are attended to. That’s why they’re all so healthy.”

“And eaten.” The smell of lunch threatened to re-enter my memory like vapors escaping from under the lid of a pot.

“Vegetarian, are we?”

“No, nothing like that, that would warm a veterinarian’s heart.”

“Well, the joy of being a veterinarian in the country is that right now there are no animals in distress. It’s my time with David. I can take the afternoon off if I want because I can close my practice when I want, and it seems to me like you don’t have a string of appointments in your diary, either. I’m taking the horses to the stables. Meet you in five minutes.”

A couple of minutes later, the three of us and four dogs were making our way on a single footpath to a swimming hole a few minutes’ walk up the river. In various spots, we had to duck and dive the sharp thorns of the wild blackberry bushes that edged the path.

After a ten-minute walk, we arrived at a clearing on the river bank where a small wooden deck with a bench was shaded by a big fig tree. It spat its wild, ripe fruit onto the soil and the deck. Jean-Christophe had to brush patches clean with his handkerchief for us to sit. I didn’t know any men who still used handkerchiefs. Three broad, low cascades tumbled over rocks, forming three pools in which wild ducks swam. Soon I found myself drawn into the tranquility of the scenery. We sat in silence, watching the steady flow of the water and enjoying a breeze that moved the thick heat through our hair. Jean-Christophe took three bottles of water from his backpack. David was the first to flip his shirt over his head and pull off his shoes to dive into the cool greenness of the water. The swimming hole was fed by the lowest cascade and sheltered by the extension of a flat rock into its bottom end, forming a kind of a natural rock pool. David was a good swimmer for his age—I noticed the ease of his movements in the water.

“Your grandmother never wanted a swimming pool installed. She had a fear of water. But she used to come and sit here often. The deck is fairly new. Nice, isn’t it?”

“Is it deep?” I was slightly concerned for the boy splashing water toward us.

“Yes, but David is an excellent swimmer.”

“Who taught him?”

“Vincent made sure he had lessons from when he was only a toddler. He always seemed more at home in the water than on land.”

“Vincent said that the horseback riding was supposed to help his development.”

“David is a special boy, as you will see as you get to know him. He has some developmental problems, to simplify it, especially with speaking and writing. While I was doing my thesis during my years of studying, the subject of animals used in the training of disadvantaged children interested me greatly, and I have done some research while living in Paris. Now that I have...‘retired’...to the country, I guess you could say, it’s a kind of a hobby, more than a job. But the horseback riding has helped David greatly in terms of all kinds of abilities.”

I could see that he had genuine affection for the boy. “And no children of your own to horse-train?” He looked to be in his early forties, a time when most people were settled down with a family.

“Not yet,” he smiled without elaborating. “How about you?”

“Oh, unlike you I’m still far too young,” I teased. I felt strangely light-hearted in his company.

“Now, if that isn’t an insult, I’ve never heard one.”

“Oh, come on, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I’m not so sure.” He got a glint in his eye. “David, I think Marlien is trying to insult me.”

Before I knew what was happening, Jean-Christophe was on his feet and had me poised over the edge of the deck.

“Don’t you dare—” I was going to add some insulting threats, but the four dogs, who were resting in the shade next to us, took the lead of Jean-Christophe’s playful gesture and jumped up against us. It only took an instant for Jean-Christophe to lose his balance on the already water-splashed, slippery wood before we fell backward into the water with the dogs following voluntarily.

Despite the heat, the water was an icy shock to my system. But before long, our party of two adults, one child, and four dogs were making such a fuss splashing about in the water that the noise attracted an elderly couple, the Boulets, who lived on a small farm a little ways up the river and were out looking for their dog.

I battled to pull off my wet jeans in the water, laughing as David tried to push my head under the water and two dogs dragged on my T-shirt at the back.

“Off!” I laughed, both to the dogs and to David. “I really have to learn their names,” I said to Jean-Christophe. “How do you tell them to go away in French? My accent must be so bad that they don’t understand a word I’m yelling.” I pointed to the liver-and-white bitch. “That one is Artemis. What are their names?”

“The lemon-and-white bitch is Arduinna, the Gaulish huntress goddess. The black-and-white male is Aragorn, King from Lord of the Rings, and the black male is Vadrales, the famous Lord Vadrales, the hunter from Tarzan. Artemis is the goddess of the wilderness, the hunt, wild animals and fertility. Very imaginative.”

“I know the meaning of the names. So who is the hunter in the family?”

“Your grandmother often organized duck-shooting parties on the estate. Just after I arrived in the area she decided to buy these English pointers for their extraordinary noses. It’s quite something to see when they find the game. They stand frozen, their bodies ridged, muscles tensed, head raised, and tail stiff. But they do make very good pets. They are easygoing and good-natured, very affectionate. Artemis, particularly, took to David.”

“So it’s an English breed?”

“Some say the old English pointer originated in Portugal. In the eighteenth century, British breeders crossed the pointer from Portugal to arrive at today’s English pointer. They probably used foxhounds, the bloodhound, and the greyhound. In the nineteenth century, the new breed received a lot of French and Italian pointer blood. These dogs were actually bought from a breeder here in France.”

“You know your breeds. I can see where your passion lies.”

“What can I say? Part of my occupation.”

“And I can see that my grandmother had a taste for the extravagant. Even the names...”

“All hunter names. But it’s been a while since there has been a hunt on the estate.”

“Yves doesn’t shoot ducks?”

“No, he’s not a great fan.”

“Are you?”

“I admire these dogs’ great skill, but I’m not altogether for the idea of hunting.”

“Neither am I. So, can you tell them to get off me before I start feeling like a duck?”

“Off you dogs!” he shouted in a loud voice, and in an instant the dogs abandoned their playful tugs and clambered out of the water with a push from Jean-Christophe.

I finally managed to pull off the wet, soggy pants, and this is how the Boulets first saw me, throwing my wet pants from the river onto the flat deck. Mrs. Boulet was quite gray and slightly bent, and her husband had plush white hair and the biggest moustache, twisted at the ends, that I had ever seen.

The woman looked shocked at the scene in the river, and pumping her husband in the ribs with her elbow, she said loud enough for all of us to hear, “Do you think she is naked?”

“Madame, Monsieur Boulet! What are you doing walking around here in the heat at this hour? You will dehydrate.”

Jean-Christophe had the tinge of a joke in his voice, but Madame Boulet replied very seriously, “Good afternoon, Jean, David.” They nodded in my direction. “Elsie ran off. You know that stupid dog is half deaf and she doesn’t respond to our calling, so I said to Armand that we have to come and find her, she’ll probably come down the path to the river, she does get lost so easily these days. And then we heard the shouts, and I said to Armand that there is trouble, we have to go see. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, just three hot people having a swim on a hot day. This is Marlien, Yves’ granddaughter. She arrived today.” He continued to introduce them to me and explained that they were neighbors. I wanted to say that I wasn’t related to Yves, but I didn’t.

“My dear, you should wear sunblock or you’ll get terribly burned. Pleased to meet you. But why didn’t Yves tell us about your visit? I didn’t know that he had a granddaughter.” Her voice was old and croaky.

“Oh.” I tried to pull myself up on the deck but couldn’t quite manage. “I guess Yves didn’t want to spoil the surprise.” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm from my tone, but it seemed to have gone unnoticed.

“We’ll surely have to organize a lunch.” Marie Boulet nudged her husband in the ribs again. “Don’t we, dear?”

“Yes, yes, of course, dear.” Those were the words that I would hear most often from the mouth of Armand Boulet.

I tried a second time to push myself up onto the slippery deck, when Jean-Christophe said, “Maybe you should wait for more privacy, Marlien.” And to Marie and Armand: “She didn’t pack a bathing suit.”

The old lady shot her husband an ‘I-told-you-so’ look of all-knowingness before she pulled him by the sleeve. “Come along, dear.”

“Don’t go wandering out in the heat, now,” Jean-Christophe warned. “I’ll go looking for Elsie and will bring her around to your house later. I’m sure she is just enjoying a swim further downstream, like us.”

“Thank you, Jean. Such a nice boy. You be careful now too, Jean,” she said, her aim directed at me. Then she added, as if she had almost forgotten, “Those gypsies are starting to set up camp up north again, on old Manual’s plot. Be careful.”

When they were out of earshot, I turned to Jean-Christophe. “You are terrible! She believes you.”

He pushed himself out of the water and offered me a hand. “She does, and the whole village will, too.”

“Oh, no, a gossip town.”

“Of course. There are only six thousand inhabitants. They have to do something with their time.”

“But you dragged your name through the mud, too.”

“Me? She likes me too much. You will be the seducer. In her eyes, I can do no evil. Once saved the life of their dog, Elsie, which—after their children had left the house—became the child in the house.”

“Thank you for introducing me so favorably into the community.”

He grew serious. “Look, I’m hosting a dinner party in two weeks. Just some friends from the village. Why don’t you come? That way you can start meeting some people.”

“Thanks. That’s very kind, but I’m just going to take it easy for a while. I’m not here to integrate into the community.”

“Yves explained to me the content of your grandmother’s will. From your conversation during lunch, I concluded that you are going to stay for a while. It won’t be easy. Yves is a good person, once you get to know him, but he is not the most sociable. It can get really lonely out here in the countryside, even for someone who is just on holiday. The village is small, and mostly full of elderly people, and you’ll find that although the people here are very friendly, they don’t accept outsiders into their circle easily. Even for May de la Croix’s granddaughter, as much as May was adored, it will be difficult. I know. It took some time before I integrated into the community when I moved here ten years ago. If you decide to come, you will be welcome.”

“Who else knows about the will?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask Yves. Why?”

“I was hoping to keep it quiet until we...I...have decided. I don’t want to cause a fuss.”

“Of course. That’s understandable. It is going to be the talk of the town, though, you should know. The de la Croix family has always been very prominent in the village.”

I took off my wet T-shirt and draped it over a nearby bush. When I felt his eyes on my back, I became self-conscious for the first time and lay flat on my belly on the deck in a patch of sun, adjusting the bikini strap on my back. Jean-Christophe helped David out of the water and after removing his wet shirt, came to sit next to me in the sun, his pants dripping with water.

“A dragon?” He referred to the tattoo on my shoulder.

“Mm mm.” My eyes were closed in oblivious absorption of the sun.

“Why a dragon?”

“Long story,” I said rolling onto my back.

“You are very modest for someone so beautiful. Surely you must be used to men falling at your feet.”

I felt my cheeks growing hot. “What do you mean?” I was embarrassed.

He traced a finger over my cheek. “The blushing. I’m not used to that.”

I turned my face to escape his touch. “On the contrary, I’m not used to compliments.”

“Have you been living in a cloister?” I could hear the smile in his voice. When I didn’t answer, he shifted position for our eyes to meet. “The way you stood up to Yves at lunch was very brave. Most people falter under his scorn. You’re courageous, and yet, so shy. I’m sorry if I’m making you uncomfortable with my honesty, it’s just that you surprise me. I find it...extremely noble, innocent, irresistible.”

I was flustered by his words, and shifted my focus to David. He sat with his arms wrapped around his knees in the middle of the dogs, giggling and pushing Artemis when she licked his face. I wanted more than anything to talk to David about what had happened when we had met, about the name that he had injected into my waking memory, but I didn’t quite know how to and didn’t want to say anything in front of Jean-Christophe. The silence suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“I’m heading back.” I grabbed my wet clothes and pulled them on. “Thanks for the swim.”

Jean-Christophe nodded. “Any time. Welcome to the South. If you need anything, just shout. I live up the road. I can come and fetch you for the dinner at my place if you decide to come.”

“Thanks.” My mind was elsewhere when I turned onto the footpath and saw Vadrals and Aragorn on my heels. Artemis and Arduinna stayed by David’s side. At the first opportunity I could get I was going to ask David about the strange event, which in fact then seemed so strange that I wasn’t sure that it wasn’t purely my imagination.



Yves was standing on the terrace, hands in his pockets, watching me approach from a distance. “We need to talk,” he said as I came onto the terrace. “I’ll wait in the study.”

I changed into dry clothes before meeting Yves in the big, handsome room that served as his office when he worked from home. He was pouring himself a whiskey. “*Apéritif?*”

“No thanks. We need to talk,” I echoed his earlier words, sitting down on the leather sofa facing his desk.

He took the swivel chair behind the desk. “So we do. I don’t usually engage in small talk, so let’s get down to business. Your grandmother left the estate to you, the business to me. I want to make you a proposition.”

“Why did my grandmother leave the estate to me, when she...you... didn’t want to have contact with me and my father?”

His gaze was steady as he took a sip of his drink. “Your grandmother had her reasons. That’s the past. I prefer to focus on the present dilemma.”

“The fact that I now legally own the estate?”

“Precisely. I take it you know nothing about running an estate of this size or nature. It takes a lot of money to keep a place like this, which I assume you don’t have. I want to buy you out.”

“You want to buy the estate from me?”

“Yes. I’ll offer you the market value. That way you will have a handsome investment and I can continue my life. It’s a win-win situation. Do you have any idea how much this property is worth?”

“Not yet.”

“You didn’t do your homework.” He got me and he knew it, giving me a victorious smile.

“I hardly thought about figures when I learned about my grandmother’s death.”

“You should have. It will take two months for the legal transfer of the property into your name, maybe three if the notary is slow. After that,

you will have to start covering the bills. Water, electricity, property tax, salaries, maintenance, insurance, telephone, and internet bills, food, living commodities. Get my drift?”

“I do.” I was out of my depth. We both knew it.

“I’ll give you two months to consider my proposal. If you’re wise and you accept, you will walk away with a handsome amount of money. If not, you will be forced to sell sooner or later, when the bills that you can’t cover start mounting up. I’m not even talking about the complexities of opening a bank account. Places like this don’t sell very well anymore. No one can afford to keep them. They sell for far less than what they are actually worth, if they eventually sell, but it can take months, even years. Long before then, you’ll probably be declared bankrupt, and the state will take possession of the property. Thus, the only option available to you is to sell the property to me.”

I wanted to buy time to find out more about my estranged grandmother and mother, but I knew what he had said was true. Yet, I kept a poker face. “I’m not for sale.”

“Everyone is. Sooner or later.”

“I want to know more about my grandmother and my mother.” I hoped that it sounded like a proposal.

“You’ve come to the wrong place. You’re wasting your time.”

“When I was old enough to understand that other children had mothers, the fact that mine had left me used to bother me a lot. There wasn’t a moment that I didn’t long for my mother. I want to know why she left us. I want to know what happened that my grandmother didn’t want to know me. And why leave her estate to me if she didn’t want me to be a part of her life?”

“As I’ve said, she had her reasons. But I wouldn’t encourage you to try and find your mother. Mainly because she is a vicious and evil person. More to the point of business, there is a legal clause regarding inheritance in France that you should familiarize yourself with. Children cannot be excluded from their parents’ will. Normally, the remaining spouse is entitled to half of the estate, while the other half is divided equally between the children. In this case, since I’m your grandmother’s second husband, the law doesn’t hold, but if your mother decides to make herself known, half of the property will most certainly be her legal inheritance. Only, since your mother disappeared thirty-one years ago and hasn’t attempted any contact, the law states that your grandmother was within her legal right to make you her sole beneficiary.”

“Are you saying that I shouldn’t try to find my mother, because if I do, I...you...will lose half of the property?”

“Precisely.”

“What kind of a man are you?”

“I’ll have a proposal drawn up for you to look over.”

“As I’ve said, I’m not for sale. Whether you like it or not, I’m staying until I have decided what to do, and I would appreciate just a little bit of understanding. Can’t we at least try to be civil to each other?”

He smiled. “Civility doesn’t come cheap. I would like for you to remember that I pay the bills. You are going to find that this is too much hay on your fork. When you do, the contract will be ready. In the meantime, I suggest that we keep the living arrangements as they are. I want you to see just how much money and time go into a place like this.”

“Fine. I would appreciate learning a little bit more about the property, and the running of it. Yes, you’re right. I have no idea of what it takes to run a place like this, but I am interested. The lawyer said that you inherited my grandmother’s business. What kind of business did she have?”

“Your grandmother designed top-end cutlery. There is a boutique in Montpellier. We also imported some artifacts, mostly from North Africa. Satisfied?”

“Can I visit it sometime?”

He shrugged. “Why would you?”

“I told you. I am interested.”

“We’ll see.”

“Who else knows about the will?”

“Why?”

“I thought it best to keep it quiet. For now. Until we...I know how to move forward. I understand that the village is small. People talk quickly.”

“I agree to that. I had to tell the staff and Jean-Christophe, who is a close friend. Of course, the lawyer knows. I don’t trust him too much. We’ll have to see how long he keeps the information confidential.”

“Can I see some photos?”

Yves took another sip of his whiskey and turned his chair to face the window. “I’ll try to find some albums. There aren’t many left.”

“Why?”

When he turned back to face me, he had an icy look in his steel-gray eyes. “They’ve burned. Anything else?”

I was taken aback, but it was clear that he wasn’t going to say more. “Yes. When can we start going over the estate affairs?”

“That’s Vincent’s job. You can speak with him.” I could see that no help was going to come willingly from Yves’ side. As I got up to leave, Yves jabbed a last warning at me. “It will be better for both of us if we stayed out of each other’s way as much as possible. I hate complications. Don’t start looking for long-lost love from your youth because you won’t find it here. This isn’t your home. Don’t think it will be. You’re not part of this family.”

I considered him for a long, cold moment, my eyes piercing his. “Neither are you,” I said before closing the door quietly behind me.



If lunch was a tedious affair, dinner was even worse, drawn out by a starter, the main meal, cheese, and dessert. Soon enough I learned that Marie-Hélène’s way of cooking was very much country style, which meant hearty meals in huge quantities. After my first dinner at Le Bon Soleil, Yves asked Vincent to take his espresso with him in his study to look over some business. I wasn’t invited, but I didn’t push the issue. Instead, I found David playing quietly with a wooden train at the kitchen table. Artemis lay at his feet under his chair and the other three dogs were sleeping in their beds in the corner of the kitchen. Marie-Hélène was clearing the dining room.

I sat down at the table. “What a beautiful train.” He looked at me and smiled, but remained quiet.

“David,” I started hesitantly, “do you remember this afternoon, when we met, you called me Paul?” Still, he just looked at me. “David?” When I probed again gently he turned away from me, looking silently out of the kitchen window. Marie-Hélène entered with a tray and busied herself with packing the dishwasher.

“Do you want me to tell you a story about a little red train? It was my favorite story that my daddy used to tell me,” I asked David.

He slipped off the chair and started stroking Artemis, who lifted her head lazily.

“Don’t upset the boy.” Marie-Hélène placed a glass of milk on the table. “Here’s your milk, David. Drink up now. Soon it will be bed time.”

I thought that I caught a whiff of wine on her breath. “For how long have you been working here, Marie-Hélène?”

She was preparing the coffee machine for breakfast and didn't turn to face me when she answered. "I grew up in this house."

"So you knew my grandmother well? And my mother?"

"I was her employee, not her friend."

Vincent entered the kitchen. "Come boy, time for bed. Up early tomorrow. Good night ladies." He kissed us both. When David lingered next to Artemis, Vincent smiled. "All right then, she can come."

Marie-Hélène stood with her hands on her hips. "You know, it's not good for the child that the dog sleeps in his bed."

"Ah, she sleeps on the floor."

She gave a snort. "Like hell she does. I've seen the dog hair when I wash the sheets."

Vincent gave her a pinch on the cheek. "Lighten up, will you, old woman? Let the boy have some comfort. Come on, you two." He winked at David and gave a whistle to which Artemis got up and wagged her tail.

Marie-Hélène shook her head in disapproval, watching them leave through the backdoor. She turned to me again. "Do you need anything in your room?"

"No, thanks. Where is Yves' room?"

She frowned suspiciously. "Why?"

"I should know which rooms are private when I start nosing around the house."

Her back was stiff. "The first one after the ballroom on the east side, facing north. We call it the blue room."

"Thanks."

"Good night," she said. "If you want herbal tea there is a selection."

"Where is the kettle?" I had already looked around to make myself a cup of tea.

"Here we don't use kettles like you English do. You can boil water on the gas stove, or use the microwave."

"I'm not English—" I started, but she was already walking off to her quarters.

I carried a cup of Lemon Verbena infusion to my bedroom. Light poured from underneath the study door, so I gathered that Yves was still working. I didn't have international roaming on my cell phone, but I had activated the text-message functionality. The next five minutes I spent typing a short message to my friend Kitty, Paul's sister, and to my uncle in Nelspruit to let them know that I had arrived safely. I attached the postal address and the landline number of the estate, which I had gotten earlier from Vincent. He also told me that I could access the internet

via a wireless connection. Not in the mood for starting up my hotmail account, I promised myself that I would do it the day after to keep in touch with some clients and my neighbor, in case they needed to get hold of me.

I had a lot on my mind and plenty to think about, but I couldn't put off my curiosity any longer, so I carried my infusion upstairs into the tower and started reading the titles of the books on the bookshelves. They were dusty and so well organized that it could have been a mini-library. All of them were in French and most were history and geography books, with very few novels. I couldn't help but wonder if it was my mother's choice and if she had touched these very books as I was doing, removing some, and paging through them, not really reading anything. I sat down on the couch with a book about the region of Languedoc Roussillon, sipping my warm drink, when a sudden noise made me jump. It came from the hallway and sounded like the creaking of a door. Quietly putting the book and cup on the coffee table, I tiptoed to the door and peered downstairs. My bedroom door was still closed, as I had left it. I hovered for several seconds, a little bit on edge, and then went downstairs to call it a night. During the day I had never guessed how scary a big house like that could be at night.

While splashing water on my face in the bathroom, I heard the noise again, this time clearer. Grabbing a towel from the bar, I pounced to the bathroom door. Nothing. I opened the bedroom door a crack and looked down the hallway. Except for a light coming from the east end where Yves' bedroom was supposed to be, everything was dark. I pushed the door shut and turned the key.

Despite the heat, I pulled the bed sheet up to my chin and didn't turn off the light. I was lying dead silent, not stirring when I heard the floorboards in the hallway creaking. My heartbeat was so loud I thought that it was audible to the naked ear. The creaking stopped in front of my door. I felt hot and cold at the same time. I couldn't remember the last time I was that scared. The overhead light fluttered three times before it went out completely. I barely managed to reach out my hand to switch on the bedside lamp.

All through the night there was no relief from the heat. It was the early hours of the morning before I finally dozed off, but I was awakened at six by the persistent song of the cicadas and the bright sun filtering through my curtains. I had forgotten to close the shutters in front of the windows and the sliding doors. My fear evaporated with the breaking of the day, but I didn't quite feel like myself.