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The Lantern

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The Lantern



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Prologue

Some scents sparkle and then quickly disappear, like the effervescence of citrus zest or a bright note of mint. Some are strange siren songs of rarer origin that call from violets hidden in woodland, or irises after spring rain. Some scents release a rush of half-forgotten memories. And then there are the scents that seem to express truths about people and places that you have never forgotten: the scents that make time stand still.

That is what *Lavande de Nuit*, Marthe's perfume, is to me. Beyond the aroma's first charge of heliotrope, as the almond and hawthorn notes rise, it carries sights and sounds, tastes and feelings that unfurl one from the other: the lavender fields, sugar-dusted biscuits, wild flowers in meadows, the wind's plainsong in the trees, the cloisters of silver-flickering olives, the garden still warm at midnight, and the sweet, musky smell of secrets.

That perfume is the essence of my life. When I smell it, I am ten years old again, lying in the grass at Les Genévriers, on one of those days of early summer when the first fat southerly winds warm the ground and the air begins to soften with promise. I am twenty, as I toss my long hair and walk on air towards my lover. I am thirty, forty, fifty. Sixty, and frightened . . .

How can I be frightened by a scent?

PART ONE



Chapter One

The rocks glow red above the sea, embers of the day's heat below our balcony at the Hôtel Marie.

Down here, on the southern rim of the country, out of the mistral's slipstream, the evening drops as viscous liquid: slow and heavy and silent. When we first arrived, the stifling sultriness made sleep impossible; night closed in like the lid of a tomb.

Now, in the few hours I do sleep, I dream of all we have left behind: the hamlet on the hill and the whispering trees. Then, with a start, I'm awake again, remembering.

Until it happens to you, you don't know how it will feel to stay with a man who has done a terrible thing. Not to know whether the worst has happened or is yet to come; wanting so badly to trust him now.

We cannot leave France, so, for want of anywhere better to go, we are still here. When we first settled in, it was the height of summer. In shimmering light, sleek white yachts etched diamond-patterned wakes on the inky blue playground, and oiled bodies roasted on honey gold sand. Jazz festivals wailed and syncopated along the coastline. For us, days passed numberless and unnamed.

As the seasonal sybarites have drifted away to the next event, to a more fashionable spot for September, or back to the daily work that made these sunny weeks possible, we have stayed on. At this once-proud *belle époque* villa built on a rocky outcrop around the headland from the bay of Cassis, we have found a

short-term compromise. Mme Jozan has stopped asking whether we intend to stay a week longer in her faded *pension*. The fact is, we are. No doubt she will tell us, in her pragmatic way, when our presence is no longer acceptable.

We eat dinner at a café on the beach. How much longer it will be open is anyone's guess. For the past few nights, we've been the only customers.

We hardly speak as we drink some wine and pick at olives. Dialogue is largely superfluous beyond courteous replies to the waiter.

Dom does try. 'Did you walk today?'

'I always walk.'

'Where did you go?'

'Up into the hills.'

I walk in the mornings, though sometimes I don't return until mid-afternoon.

We go to bed early, and then on to places in our dreams: places that are not as they really are. This morning, in the shallows of semi-consciousness, I was in a domed greenhouse, a ghost of itself: glass clouded with age; other panes shattered, glinting and ready to fall; ironwork twisted and corrupt with rust. No such edifice exists at Les Génévriers, but that was where I was.

In my dream, glass creaked audibly above my head as I stood mending bent iron shelves, frustration mounting as I failed repeatedly to straighten the corroded metal. Through broken glass, the pleated hills were there, always in the background, just as in life.

By day, I try not to think of the house and the garden and the hillside we have left behind, which ensures, of course, that my brain must deal with the thoughts in underhand ways. Trying is not necessarily succeeding, either. Some days I can think of nothing else but what we have lost. It might as well be in a different country, not a few hours' drive to the north of where we are now.

*

Les Génévriers. The name of the property is misleading, for there is only one low-spreading juniper, hardly noble enough to warrant such recognition. There is probably a story behind that, too. There are so many stories about the place.

Up in the village, a wooded ten-minute climb up the hill, the inhabitants all have tales about Les Génévriers: in the post office, the bar, the café, the community hall. The susurrations in the trees on its land was their childhood music, a magical rustling that seemed to cool the hottest afternoon. The cellar had once been renowned for its *vin de noix*, a sweet walnut liqueur. Then it was shut up for years, slumbering like a fairy castle on the hillside, and prey to forbidden explorations while legal arguments raged over ownership in a notaries' office in Avignon. Local buyers shied away, while foreign bidders came, saw, and went.

It is more than a house; it is a three-storey farmhouse with a small attached barn in an enclosed courtyard, a line of workers' cottages, a small stone guesthouse standing alone across the path, and various small outbuildings: it is officially designated as *un hameau*, a hamlet.

'It has a very special atmosphere,' the agent said that morning in May when we saw it for the first time.

Rosemary hedges were pin-bright with pungent flowers. Beyond, a promenade of cypresses, prelude to a field of lavender. And, rising at the end of every view, the dominant theme: the creased blue hills of the Grand Luberon.

'There are springs on the land.'

That made sense. Three great plane trees grew close to the gate of the main house, testament to unseen water; they would not have grown so tall, so strong, without it.

Dom caught my hand.

We were both imagining the same scenes, in which our dream life together would evolve on the gravel paths leading under shady oak, pine, and fig trees, between topiary and low stone walls marking the shady spots with views down the wide valley, or up to the hilltop village crowned with its medieval castle. Tables and chairs where we would read or sip a cold

drink, or offer each other fragments of our former lives while sinking into a state of complete contentment.

‘What do you think?’ asked the agent.

Dom eyed me complicitly.

‘I’m not sure,’ he lied.

Chapter Two

Bénédicte drifts through the rooms of the lower floors, into the dust of venerable scents: flecks of the lavender held in the corners of drawers; flakes of pinewood armoire; the soot of long-dead fires; and, from the present, the deep mossy aroma from cloud formations of damp above the rose-tiled floor; the sharp white smells of late-spring flowers outside.

These visitors are new. She is sure she has never seen them before, though she closes her eyes and tries to think calmly, to count her breaths, slowing her intake of air, scouring her memory to make sure. When she opens her eyes, they are still there.

The strangeness is that they stare straight into her face, just as they look around her so intently, into the corners of the rooms, up to the cracked ceilings, the fissures in the walls, yet they don't acknowledge her presence. All is silent, but for the tapping of the catalpa tree in the courtyard and the creak of a newly opened shutter that lets in a shifting band of brightness.

I will sit a while longer, Bénédicte thinks. Watch to see what they do next.

Breathe. Breathe deeply.

Chapter Three

The property drew us in immediately. Not love at first sight, exactly, not as explosive as that: more a deep, promising undertow, as if it had been waiting for us, and we for it. It was familiar, in that it was the same sensation as when Dom and I first met: recklessness muted by instant empathy, surrounded by beauty.

Meeting Dom was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to me. A classic whirlwind romance. Deciding so quickly to throw my lot in with his was the most daring, rash, life-enhancing choice I had ever made. My friends and family wondered if I had lost my head, and of course I had. Head, heart, mind and body. I wanted him and, miraculously, he wanted me.

Dom and I met in a maze.

It was on the shores of Lake Geneva. I'd seen a photograph of the château at Yvoire while flipping through a magazine in a coffee shop that Saturday morning. If the accompanying description was beguiling, the name of the maze in the garden was irresistible. It was called the Labyrinth of the Five Senses.

According to the waitress, it was only twenty minutes out of town, across the border in France. But it wasn't hard to take a taxi, or even a bus. I was doing nothing else that whole weekend, staying in one of Geneva's soulless city centre hotels, sleep broken by the roar of traffic, bored already by the thought of more dull meetings on Monday morning.

So I went.

It was a picturesque little place. Golden spires thrust up from

narrow alleys, catching the winter sun. The château, curiously small and homely, seemed to rise from the lake itself.

I wandered quite happily on my own, unconcerned by the maze but ever more certain with every sense that I had taken a wrong turn somewhere in life. My so-called career was in a dull phase, and, as such, a reflection of my own limitations; it was one of the reasons I accepted the job that had brought me briefly to Switzerland. As for any social life, it seemed as if high tide had receded, leaving only wrinkles and minor wreckage to show for the fun.

Then everything changed.

There, in a living cloister of hornbeam, the air richly perfumed by a line of daphne, there was Dom.

‘I seem to be lost,’ he said.

He spoke in French, but leaving no doubt that he was British. The atrocious accent gave it away, of course, but it was a very British thing to say, under the circumstances.

‘What about you?’ he asked, and we both laughed, because the eponymous labyrinth was nothing more complicated than a few low hedges that linked the gardens.

His face was tanned, and there were strands of gold and red in his bear-brown hair. A good smile, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Tall, but not towering. I had noticed him earlier. He was on his own, too, set apart somehow from the other visitors in more than the sense of not being half of a couple or part of a family. Partly it was the intense self-assurance in the way he walked, loose and confident like an athlete. I saw him take in a particularly pretty view of plants and stone set against the water but somehow remain detached. He stood still, absorbed it, and moved off. While other tourists attacked with cameras, greedily capturing the scene, imprinting themselves on its beauty, he simply looked and went on.

We started talking, inconsequential nonsense about mazes, then, imperceptibly at first, moving in the same direction until we were walking the same path together. Through the Garden of Sound, where he talked, unexpectedly, about Debussy; through the Garden of Scent, where the cold air was spring-

sharp with narcissi; on through the Gardens of Colour and Touch, where we discussed synaesthesia, and settled on Fridays being orange and shiny-smooth. In the Garden of Taste, we stopped.

‘It’s supposed to be full of edible plants,’ he said, reading from a leaflet.

We looked around. It was February, not a good month for garden crops.

‘You could try that ornamental cabbage,’ I said.

‘Tempting – but no, thank you.’

So we kept walking, out of the château gardens to a dark, warm café where we drank coffee and ate cake. We had more coffee. And still we talked. It was so easy. It became a conversation that continued and sustained and bound us as hours became days became months.

That day at the lake, I could have taken a different turn on those labyrinthine paths and we would never have met. I might have taken a taxi instead of a bus, arrived an hour earlier and missed him. I might not have agreed to attend those extra meetings on Monday and spent the weekend alone in Geneva.

But you can’t think like that. It is what it is. Either walk on, or accept.

He had been skiing with friends but decided to cut his losses a few days early. The winter had been unseasonably warm and sunny, and the snow had yielded early to mud-stained slush.

‘Didn’t you want to stay just for the company, enjoy the rest of your time off together?’ I asked him over that first coffee. Now that he had taken off his sunglasses, I could see he was older than I’d thought, a fair bit older than me. A low lamp on the table lit his eyes, so I could see they were grey-green. Lovely eyes, full of intelligence. A bit of mischief, too.

‘It’s not really time off for me in the same way it is for them.’

‘How so?’

‘I don’t have a job like theirs. Not one I have to go back to, anyway. Sitting around drinking all day watching the snow melt doesn’t give me quite the same release it does them.’

‘I see,’ I said, although I didn’t.

He cut off the obvious question. ‘I’d rather listen to music. What about you – what do you like to do best of all?’

‘I love to read.’

‘What kind of reading?’

Sometimes you can tell all you need to know about a person just in the way they ask the question: politely, or with genuine curiosity, denoting a fine understanding of all it might reveal – from a rich inner life to a point of compatibility between strangers. It was also a hard question to answer, its simplicity lethal as a narrow blade.

‘Anything that makes me think, and dream a while and make connections,’ I said at last, as the incoming rush of a hundred thoughts pooled into coherence. ‘Modern fiction, some classics, biographies, travel books, some poetry occasionally. Beautifully written cookbooks . . .’

I watched his face. ‘Don’t ask me my favourite author,’ I said quickly, not wanting to be disappointed too soon. ‘I can’t bear that question. I can never think how to answer it, which gives the impression that I hardly read at all, or that my tastes never change, or I never make new discoveries, when nothing could be further from the truth.’

He smiled. ‘Understood. So long as you don’t ask me for the title of the best book I’ve read recently.’

There it was again, the ease between us.

‘Never,’ I said. ‘I can hesitate over that one so long because I’m trying to find a match for whoever’s asking, to think of something I’m sure they would think was perfect, that it leaves me tongue-tied . . .’

We both laughed, and I felt a tightness inside me loosen for the first time in a long time.

‘I’m American,’ I said, when he asked.

‘You don’t sound it. I couldn’t place your accent, but I wouldn’t have guessed American.’

‘I’m kind of a hybrid.’

‘Meaning?’

‘My dad’s a New Yorker. My mother says she’s from Sussex, but her father was French. They met and then married in Paris. I went to school in France and England, college in the US, but I’ve lived in London for years.’

‘You live in London now, or here?’

‘In London. I’m just working here for a few days.’

‘What do you do?’ he asked.

‘I’m a translator.’

He didn’t say, ‘Love of words again,’ or some other trite comment.

‘What kind of translating?’

‘A very ordinary kind. Commercial stuff mainly – advertising and promotional brochures, contracts.’

It was hard to resist telling him how bored I was with the vapidness of it all, the false premises of product desirability, the ugliness of urban life, the hot rush of the tube trains, the jostle of the intent, white-faced crowds, the dirt, the sirens ripping through the nights. I almost did, then stopped myself, not wanting to sound negative or petulant, both of which I felt too often for comfort when I was overwhelmed by the city. I was only a few years out of college but already it felt as if I had taken a wrong turn and trapped myself.

Did he sense some of that in my tone? ‘And if you weren’t translating?’

‘If I didn’t have to work, you mean?’ I asked, reminding him there was still an explanation due.

‘If you could do whatever you wanted every day.’

‘Apart from reading, obviously. I would love to translate books if I could get a commission. There are some fantastic French writers, like Pierre Magnan and Chloé Delaume, who aren’t often translated into English. I’d love to have a try myself, and really do them justice in my own way.’

‘Making the books into your own, partly?’

‘Well, you can’t do that, because you must always be faithful to someone else – to the details and the spirit of their work. But you’re right in a way; you can be subtly inventive and the joy of it would be to achieve that special balance.’

‘You’re a faithful kind of person, then?’

‘Always. It’s important.’ Then, realizing what he meant and how naive that sounded even though it was true, I laughed and said, ‘Are you, though? I suppose you’re married?’

He shook his head very slowly, looking into my eyes. ‘No.’

I failed to find an adequate response.

‘It will come, what you really want to do,’ he said, breaking the sudden awkwardness. ‘You’re still young.’

‘I can dream.’

‘Of course it can happen.’

My face must have betrayed the scepticism I felt.

‘Why not?’ he asked. ‘It happened to me.’

Dominic is a writer – of music. After college, he and a friend started a geo-technology business with one computer and a clever idea. Dom thought it might give him some kind of income while he worked on his music. He didn’t do much music for the next twenty years but the business did better than anyone could have predicted. And, as they sold just before the downturn, he’s considered doubly lucky – or astute, depending on your point of view. I could vaguely remember reading in the business section about his company, although it wasn’t so high-profile that I could have put his name to it. In any case, he would far rather people knew his name for a piece of music than as someone who made a pile of money.

At Les Genévriers, he would disappear for hours into his music room. Notes floated out into the courtyard from the new piano he bought in Cavaillon, followed by expressive silences that suggested the transference of sound to paper, or computer screen, or the inner process of composing, or sometimes a siesta on the plump cushions of the sofa he installed there.

That first summer, like the deepening love and understanding between us, the property kept growing. Armed with a fistful of medieval keys, we discovered new rooms, hidden chambers revealed below and beside the rooms we thought we already knew.

The attached stone barn in the courtyard was the first surprise gift. When we finally managed to unlock it (a feat of strength the real estate agent had not managed), we found it was a large, light, and well-proportioned room with a tiled floor, plastered and whitewashed walls, and an enormous fireplace. Dom knew immediately what it was: his music room.

Underneath this room was a flaking, splinted wooden door accessed from the sloping garden. We broke the obsolete lock, expecting to find a tool store or some such. Inside was a paved antechamber to a warren of caverns and Romanesque vaults. In the row of cottages, crudely modernized then abandoned, we found semi-underground chambers by the simple expedient of opening a cupboard door.

And in these hidden places were the discarded objects we claimed as gifts from the house: a bad painting of a peace lily, a hoe, a vase, a set of ramekins pushed deep inside a kitchen cupboard, a pair of rubber boots, an iron birdcage, much rusted and with a broken catch.

Dom's laugh rang under the curved ceilings of the half-open cellars of the lower ground floor. Down there we found pillars and arches, and under these ribs of the main house, drifts of wine bottles, glass frosted opaque by long use. Up in the kitchen, where the units were ingeniously formed of cast-off wardrobe and cupboard doors, waited the spicy Vacqueyras wines celebrating both our territorial expansion and the happy expansion of ourselves.

Outside, our northern pores sucked in the warm blue sky, the astringent bracers of rosemary and thyme, the dust of ages, and we looked at each other and smiled. A home of our own – and what a place!

Chapter Four

The visitors are still here.

Bénédicte waits for them to go, holding herself tightly in her chair, pushing down the terrors that will follow if they do not. Breathing deeply, she makes herself see – behind her tightly closed eyes – the precious valley with its long southern screen of mountain.

Beyond, in the rising hills to the east, the first shivers of the Alps heft the land further into the sky. There the fields are corded purple, forever that long-ago summer when she scythed and bent with the other girls, the women, and the elderly, to pick lavender flowers for the perfume factory.

Higher still the land is stubbled with sheep. They say that each troop of sheep keeps the scents of its particular grazing land deep in its fleeces, so that its provenance can be established by what the nose detects in the matted, unwashed wool: thyme and dry rocks, acorn-mashed mud, slopes where the herb savory grows in abundance, the pollen of gentian fields, hollows where leaves rot with windblown spikes of lavender.

Breathing slowly.

Breathing in scents of the fields and sun-warmed stone.

Hearing only the sound of a lightly running stream made by the wind in the trees.