

The Winter Guest

Karen Swan

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

Karen Swan is the *Sunday Times* and international best-selling author of thirty books which have sold over five million copies around the world. A prolific author, she writes two novels a year and her books are known for their evocative locations. Karen sees travel as vital research, and likes to set deep, complicated love stories within twisting plots.

A former fashion editor, she lives in Sussex, England, with her family and three dogs.

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Karen Swan

Three Summers
All I Want for Christmas
Christmas by Candlelight
The Christmas Postcards
The Paris Secret
Midnight in the Snow
The Secret Path
Together by Christmas
The Hidden Beach
The Christmas Party
The Spanish Promise
The Christmas Lights
The Greek Escape
The Christmas Secret
The Rome Affair
Christmas Under the Stars
The Paris Secret
Christmas on Primrose Hill
Summer at Tiffany's
Christmas in the Snow
The Summer Without You
Christmas at Claridge's
Christmas at Tiffany's
The Perfect Present
Prima Donna
Players

The Wild Isles series
The Last Summer

The Stolen Hours
The Lost Lover
The Midnight Secret

OceanofPDF.com

Karen Swan

THE WINTER GUEST



OceanofPDF.com

For Islay and Juby Bowman, troupers both

OceanofPDF.com

'… la plus belle des ruses du Diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas.'
(the devil's greatest trick is persuading you he does not exist)

Charles Baudelaire, Le Figaro *1864*

'Diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions.'

Anonymous

OceanofPDF.com

Prologue

Bol d'Or Regatta, Cologny, Lake Geneva
13 June 1963

The lake felt as wild as open ocean, the yacht pitching on the waves and the tempest quarrelling with the mainsail, making it flap like a terrified bird. Water soused the deck with breathtaking violence, throwing him left, then right, then left, but his captors forged ahead, heading for the very heart of the storm. It had been forecast, but no one had anticipated the speed or the ferocity with which it would come in.

His head throbbed. He'd taken a blow that had knocked him out but he'd still put together enough to recognize what was coming – the opportunity this storm presented. Even before he'd faded to black, the world had been growing smaller with every passing minute: a sky dropped to shoulder height, grey walls closing in so that even the mighty Alps were hidden from sight.

At the start line, as the sailors lined up and cannon boomed on the shore, there would have been hundreds of competitors at their elbows. Now, from his position wedged under the bench, he could hear radio transmissions confirming that half the field had retired at Le Bouveret, the switch point of the race. Those who dared try the route back to Cologny were taking a crazy risk. He'd heard someone say they'd passed a dozen capsized vessels so far. Even through the thick sail canvas in which he was wrapped and bound – and in which he assumed he'd been smuggled aboard – he could see the sky glowing red as flares shot up into the storm clouds. He could make out the low whine of rescue boats ploughing through the gale around them, trying to find the sailors calling for help amid six-foot waves. Now and then their shouts cut through the squall, but no one would hear his.

He felt the terror of his coming death like bolts of electricity through his body, fear and incipient hypothermia making him judder and convulse. He had lost control of his bladder pitifully early on – he'd thought they would do it quickly, but they'd made a coward of him as well as a victim by waiting for the storm to swallow them up, the hours trudging past like years.

He heard the scuff of boots on deck beside him. Hands grabbed at his shapeless form, pulling him from under the bench and lifting him up. The boat lurched over the crest of a wave and skidded into a trough, the men losing their balance, and he slammed into something hard – what was it? Impossible to process anything now. Rational thinking gave way to mere consciousness and simple sensation. Time switched up into a gallop. The wind whistled beneath and around him.

He felt himself swung, and for a moment he was airborne – free. His mind leapt from his body, as though thrown clear, playing through the brightest, most beautiful moments of a life that had been too short. He saw their faces, their eyes. He saw the first time he'd ever laid eyes on *her*, scintillating in a stuffy room. The second sighting of her, standing before the painting that had been their only link, her back to him and the little tilt of her head—

Gravity won and he landed hard. For a fraction of a second the lake resisted, her surface tension bracing against his weight; then she gave way and he slipped in, the waves closing over him immediately. The cold was no longer a shock. Wet was wet. It was happening at last and although his dummied body thrashed, his mind floated, detaching …

He sensed his killers' growing distance. They hadn't even wound in the sail to lose speed, the boat just cutting the line, pulling away from him as he sank fast into the depths behind them, into a realm where everything was still, dark and silent.

She glowed in his mind's eye again and he saw the electric flash in her eyes as he'd told her, standing in front of that painting, what he already knew to be true: that their love was a fact, their destiny already written. In that moment, he'd known that all he had to do was wait.

And he had.

And he would again.

The breath was leaving his body, death enfolding him in an icy embrace, but he would wait for her still.

In the next life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Villa Mirelle, near Cologny, Lake Geneva
24 November 2026

Dulcie Beaumont's footsteps echoed through the reception hall, her leather-soled boots sounding smartly on the ancient oak timbers as she passed by tall windows, a porcelain-skinned figure behind old glass. The villa absorbed her within its elements, like a doll in a miniature house; she was as much a part of its fabric as the unseen mouse scurrying behind skirting boards, the grandfather clock ever ticking in the corner like a soldier on watch.

Firelight flickered softly, throwing an amber glow onto the flower arrangement in the centre of the circular lion's-paw table. In the summer it would be replaced every four days with fresh blooms from the gardens – hydrangeas, delphiniums, roses – but at this time of year the housekeeper, Helda, arranged it using dried flowers held over in the cutting room. They would do for a month or more, but they gave no scent and the colours were muted. To put a hand to the petals risked their instant deterioration into pigmented powder. What they offered was a dramatic silhouette, a moment of impact upon walking into the space; and that, of course, was what mattered. This house had seen its fair share of momentous occasions during its three-hundred-year history, and faded glory was still glory.

Dulcie could hear the low timbre of voices carrying along the hallway, coming from the kitchen. She headed for the staircase instead, slipping off her coat, damp from the drizzle, and laying it across the carved newel post. A token of her return. She climbed the steps, knowing the squeak of every tread, the slight wobble of the balustrade on the second turn as she went straight to her bedroom. It was untouched since her childhood, but it had

never been adapted for a child and the pale blue toile de Jouy wallpaper and curtains felt as appropriate for her now as they had been comforting when she was little. The bed was cocooned with draperies that hung from a walnut *ciel de lit*; her favourite painting still hung on the wall above her dressing table, a light craquelure gradually creeping across its surface like a frost. The cushions on the daybed were moth-nibbled, her mother's balding childhood teddy bear peeking through.

There was a softness to the room, as if the mists from the lake had crept in through the windows and blurred and smudged all its edges. Dulcie felt her body relaxing as she unzipped her boots and sank onto the bed with a small groan. It had been a tense afternoon.

She checked her phone; notifications had been pinging on the drive all the way back here from Geneva, and it was no surprise to see they were all from the same person. '*Did you get it?*'

'*Yes. Twelve thousand above estimate tho,*' Dulcie typed. She was about to add more, but as soon as she'd pressed send her phone rang in her hand, startling her a little.

'Quinn – hi.'

'Twelve?' Jasper Quinn's pale face looked up at her from the screen.

He had been Dulcie's boss when they'd both worked for Madeleine and Dick Keswick, husband and wife interior designers to the cream of London society. The Keswicks had counted royalty and nobility among their clientele; it was a badge of honour to have a Keswick kitchen or a bedroom carpet personally sourced by Maddie in the Atlas Mountains. But Dick's sudden death nine months earlier – an overdose, reported in the press as a 'short illness' – had brought a chill wind to their cosy pocket of Pimlico. Maddie had abruptly folded the business and retreated to her Lake District estate, leaving Quinn and Dulcie in a unique position.

Quinn, as heir apparent, had willingly stepped up, but without the Keswicks' patronage he had quickly begun to feel less like a dauphin and more like a great pretender. Dick had always said that the problem with thoroughbreds – of any kind – was that they were easily startled and quick to buck. Quinn had the eye the business needed, but he lacked the Keswicks' charm and their ingrained social ease with customers. He'd had a rough start in life, running away from home as a teenager; Maddie and Dick had taken him under their wing seven years ago, after finding him sleeping in the doorway of their Pimlico shop one rainy March morning.

Dulcie, on the other hand, was three years out of Edinburgh University, a well-connected young woman with a signet ring and a trust fund. A social chameleon, she could slink from an underground gig to a hunt ball with a single twist of her hair and a quick change in the car. She had impeccable taste, clothes looked good on her and people liked being around her. To most acquaintances, her life appeared effortlessly privileged and her job as the Keswicks' office junior was assumed to be suitably decorative, if rather insubstantial. It never occurred to anyone that it brought Dulcie actual creative fulfilment; that perhaps, for a girl who had been orphaned at the age of twelve, there was a deeper motive in wanting to create beautiful homes.

Quinn's somewhat reluctant invitation to join forces and start up their own company together had been a pragmatic one. He had ideas, but no money; Dulcie had resources and was 'the right fit'. Part of the deal in 'bringing her on board' involved her investing a significant lump sum from her trust into taking over the lease of the Keswick store. His full-chested optimism about the startup had convinced her to take the leap, but Quinn Beaumont had been fully up and running for four months now, and they had only one new project on the books: a mews house in Kensington belonging to a divorced baroness. They needed cash flow to furnish it and to keep replenishing stock in the store, but their invoices always had to be chased, with payments slow and often coming in in instalments – a signifier of the very aristocracy of their clients, who were blue-blooded but usually broke. They were burning through her cash, and yet Quinn still insisted they could never compromise. They couldn't use just *any* thing in their schemes, only the perfect thing, and he had been adamant she must procure the Signac painting at auction here today, whatever the cost.

But it was one thing falling in love with something, quite another overpaying for it. Their monthly outgoings were making Dulcie lose sleep at night. It was her name on the lease, her signature on the cheques … Would he be quite so particular if it was his money he was spending?

Quinn looked ponderous. 'Well, twelve over means someone else wanted it too.'

'Yes. Tom Gifford was going hard—'

His blue eyes narrowed. 'The Bamford job?'

'Probably.' Dulcie shrugged. 'And there was a phone bidder who stayed in till nine over.'

‘Okay, good.’ Quinn seemed satisfied that they had won this three-horse race, as if the others’ keen interest only proved his instincts correct about the perfection of the piece. ‘Invoice the client today and arrange collection.’

‘Yup.’ Dulcie wanted that money back in the business account as quickly as possible.

She saw his eyes fall to the background behind her, that astute, almost invisible scrutiny of the small treasures collected over various lifetimes that somehow collectively came to define a home. It was true her grandmother’s house was the embodiment of the Keswick aesthetic: idle grandeur, mellow opulence. A look that couldn’t be bought outright, only curated if – *if* – someone was possessed of a keen eye, a magpie heart and almost unlimited budget.

Villa Mirelle had belonged to her grandmother’s family and been passed down for five generations. It occupied one of the most exclusive positions on the north-western shore of Lake Geneva, set back from the water’s edge and surrounded by ancient trees and mature gardens dotted with flowering shrubs. Nothing at all of the property could be seen from the grand entrance gates, just a winding drive, lush lawns and mossy statuary caught between alternating shadows and light. Even on the final approach, it only winked into view in glimmers offered up through a wide, trellised arch: a three-storey villa with soft red roofs and café-crème limewash walls, duck-egg-blue shutters pinned back at every window. It was elegant and well worn, showing its age in parts, but to her eye, that only added to its charm. The lives that had been lived here had buffed a gentle patina onto the very fabric of the place: echoes of laughter rippling in the sunspots, whispers trapped in the shadows, wooden floors dimpled by dancers. Dulcie had always come here from London for her holidays when she was little, but after the car accident, it had become her home. She couldn’t see it with a fresh eye; her vision was overlaid with memories crowded one upon the other.

Quinn’s mouth opened, his gaze fastening upon something over her shoulder, and Dulcie could see he had momentarily forgotten the reason she was back out here.

‘So anyway,’ she went on, saving him before he put his foot in his mouth, ‘before the auction earlier, Gifford mentioned he’s going to the Phillips watch sale preview next Wednesday. I wondered if I should go? Right crowd. It wouldn’t hurt to quietly shake the pan and see if we can find any gold?’ Geneva had one of the most affluent and international populations in

the world. Plenty of people here owned homes in other countries, England included.

‘Well, so long as you’re discreet about it.’

‘Of course.’ Her partner had a horror of being seen to canvass for work; he wanted people to come to them, just as they had to the Keswicks, but Dulcie was more pragmatic. If Quinn wanted to maintain his exacting standards, then they desperately needed more new clients. Any pause in income would be ruinous.

‘Are you sure you can get away, though?’

‘Yes, if it’s just an hour or two, it’s fine. The city centre’s only half an hour or so from here. I can get back quickly.’

‘There’s been no change, I assume?’

‘No, I’m afraid not.’

‘Okay, well—’ He frowned, his eyes falling to a notification on screen. ‘Oh, I’ve got another call coming in. Let’s speak tomorro—’

He clicked off before he’d even finished his own sentence and Dulcie threw her phone onto the bed, irritated. They were supposed to be equal partners in the business, but he still treated her like the coffee girl. Just a coffee girl with deep pockets.

She went to the dressing-table mirror and checked her appearance, tousling her long dark hair and smoothing her fringe. It needed a trim, the ends sweeping annoyingly against her eyelashes, although she supposed it better set off her deep brown eyes. She still had some faint freckles from a summer spent in Capri, the London parks, and drinking coffee at tables outside the Pimlico cafés.

She was reapplying some lip balm when she heard the crash. Within a moment she was on her feet and running down the hall, past the low orbs of light glowing on the walls from the table lamps.

She could hear a struggle just beyond the end door, panting and cries and hushed assurances, and she burst through to find Anna, the nurse, wrestling with the tiny figure on the bed. Her grandmother, always petite, was now so thin and frail she looked like a nightdress flapping on a washing line: insubstantial and empty. But if her body was weak, she was driven by something powerful – fear or rage – that gave her fight. A lamp, a book and a glass lay scattered on the floor, water seeping into the rug.

‘Let me go! … Take your hands off me!’

‘Just … just try to relax,’ the nurse said, struggling.

‘I know what you’re trying to do!’

‘I’m just trying to keep you safe.’

‘No! You want … to hurt me!’ her grandmother cried.

‘I’m not—’ Anna had managed to pinion one of her arms, but it was clear she was trying to be gentle. ‘Madame,’ she gasped, ducking away from a flailing fist.

Dulcie ran over and managed to catch the blow, the old woman’s eyes widening in terror as she saw there were two of them. Reality had retreated from her long ago, and she inhabited an imaginary world full of terrors.

‘It’s okay, Mémé,’ Dulcie said quickly. ‘You’re safe. I’ve got you.’

‘Who are you?’ her grandmother quailed.

‘Dulcie – your granddaughter, remember?’ But the words fell, missing their target, clattering at her feet like bronze bells. There was no recognition in the old woman’s eyes.

‘Take her other arm,’ Anna said quickly, and she reached down for her phone in her uniform pocket as Dulcie held her grandmother awkwardly. She was still struggling, squawks of fear as heart-rending as they were pathetic. She had always been such an elegant woman – Dulcie couldn’t bear seeing her reduced to this, muscles wasted, teeth too large in her sunken cheeks, and that blank, limpid stare.

She watched as the nurse hit Spotify and the familiar song spread like a blush through the dimly lit room. A guitar strummed softly as a young woman’s voice, crystalline and yet gritty, rolled over words like a seal slipping through the waves. The sound was silky, mellifluous, and Dulcie immediately felt as if she were in Paris, in a time long before her own. She had never heard the song before this winter, but clearly her grandmother had, because her resistance immediately stopped and her body softened, head lilting to one side. Anna caught her as she slumped and laid her carefully back in the bed.

The nurse moved with the utmost care, handling Dulcie’s grandmother like a china doll, straightening her nightgown and smoothing her hair with quiet words of reassurance. Dulcie stood back as a peace descended, the song comforting her grandmother like a warm blanket. It reached her in ways their arms and words couldn’t, and as Dulcie watched, she smiled. Her gaze became fixed, recognizing something that wasn’t her granddaughter; wasn’t even in this room.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

Swiss Embassy, Rue de Grenelle, Paris
23 July 1962

Lise smiled as the staff were introduced to her. She would never remember all their names. Not even their faces. There were dozens of them, heads nodding, hands outstretched from starched white cuffs.

She tried not to betray her awe as Valentin led her down the line. He, of course, knew everyone's name, as well as their preferred drink, favourite colour and the schools their children attended. When he had described the residence to her, he had made it sound almost homely, but unless he had grown up in a palace … Chandeliers glistened above their heads, gilded traceries gleamed on the ceilings, walls and even the doors. Everything here sparkled. It was all so typically French – Verdure tapestries and tall mirrors, polished parquet floors and dainty salon chairs.

'And out the back here, we have a small garden.' Her husband led her towards a set of French doors that were opened for them on their approach. Lise inhaled sharply at the rush of fresh air, a reflex for a girl who had grown up in sight of the Alps.

'It's beautiful,' she said, standing on the threshold and taking in the immaculate sheet of manicured lawn. Four conical yew trees marked the curves of a gently looped gravel path encircling it, high hedges enclosing the space on all sides. Some mature trees threw down shade towards the back, but there were no flowers that she could see.

'Well, it's functional,' Valentin conceded, with the wry smile that always said more than his words. 'But gardens, as well as homes, benefit from a woman's touch.'

He was standing beside her and she could feel his hand resting on her waist, but only lightly. They were being observed by dozens of people, and this was no ordinary newlyweds' homecoming. She looked up at him. 'A project for me, you mean?'

'Well, Mrs Kennedy has her new rose garden. Shouldn't the new Madame Erlach also have one of her own?'

'I hardly think I'm as important as her.'

'To me, you are more so,' he said in a low voice, bending down a little, for he was a foot taller than her. 'Although perhaps don't tell our American friends I said that.'

She laughed. He was everyone's friend. It was why he was so good at his job; the secondment to Paris was a plum posting in the ambassadorial world.

Their courtship had been a false start followed by a whirlwind. When they'd first met in Rome two years prior at a party for the Summer Olympics, Valentin had been the Swiss ambassador to Greece and she a member of the Swiss eventing team. They had shaken hands and exchanged pleasantries – he had congratulated her on the silver medal hanging around her neck – but in spite of an immediate spark between them (at least, on her part) he had remained scrupulously polite. He was a professional diplomat, so schooled in the art of making everyone feel seen that, contrarily, she had felt quite invisible to him.

It had been a surprise, then, when he had remembered her in a restaurant in Zermatt earlier this spring. She had been lunching on the terrace with a view to the Matterhorn and hadn't noticed the handsome older man staring over; not until her friend discreetly alerted her. This time, it had been different. He had smiled with his eyes, sent over a bottle of excellent white burgundy and crossed the room with a confidence and self-assurance that had made the boys at their table shrink. How was she? he had asked, as if they were old friends. Still eventing?

She had mentioned her fall, but before she could tell him about the death of her beloved mare, or the tricky wrist injury, or how her nerve was failing her over the big jumps, he had stopped her with another smile. 'Tell me everything over dinner tonight.'

And that had been it.

They met up as often as they could – in Zürich, Athens, London, Copenhagen, wherever he was working. She stayed with him in his plush

suites at the best hotels, wrapped in bedsheets when he left and furs when he returned. He took her to white-glove affairs at the ballet and opera; they picnicked in St James's Park, where he walked on the grass in his socks; they attended a party at Onassis's Athens residence, Skorpios, before spending the rest of the week cruising the Greek islands in a small rented fishing boat. By the time he proposed to her in London, eleven weeks after their reunion in the mountains, she was ready for it. They were married in Venice within the month in front of strangers pulled from the street.

Valentin's prestigious promotion to the Paris job, in the meantime, seemed almost incidental compared to the scale of their affair, they had fallen so hard and fast. But now, standing in the ambassador's residence on the Rue de Grenelle following a three-day honeymoon in Monaco, Lise understood just how high-flying her husband's career really was.

An aide came and whispered something into his ear. Valentin's expression didn't change, but he nodded, and she felt his hand lift off her waist. 'Something's come up I have to attend to, *chérie*. But I'm glad you like it here. Sylvie will take you up to the private quarters and get you settled. I'll be up as soon as I can.'

She watched as he walked away, so distinguished-looking in his suit. He would turn thirty-six in November and already his dark hair was becoming speckled with grey, but she knew it would only make him more attractive.

'Would you like to follow me, madame?'

Her new assistant led her upstairs to what would now be home. Her cases had been brought up and unpacked, her coats already hanging in the wardrobes, her powders and scented oils lined up in the bathroom. But nothing of Valentin's graced the space.

'Where …?' She looked around. 'Where are my husband's effects?'

'In his bedroom, across the hall, madame.'

Lise was taken aback. 'But we don't want separate bedrooms. Would you bring his things here, please? Or mine to his, I don't mind; whichever is easier.'

There was a pause. 'His Excellency felt you would be more comfortable with this arrangement on account of his schedule, which can often have challenging working hours. He did not want you to be disturbed.'

This was Valentin's idea? Lise swallowed, hurt, but it wouldn't do to argue the point with the staff. She would bring it up with him privately later.

‘I have prepared a selection of gowns for you, madame,’ Sylvie said, swiftly moving on and motioning to three evening dresses hanging on padded hangers in a dressing room just off the master bedroom. ‘For the reception tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ She had hoped their first night in their new home together might be a private affair.

‘The ambassador is hosting a reception to celebrate and recognize Algeria’s newly signed independence. Monsieur Erlach was instrumental in the signing of the Évian Accords, madame.’

‘The …?’ Lise looked at her blankly.

‘I have left a brief with a summary of the negotiations on your desk, madame,’ Sylvie said assuredly, as if she had anticipated exactly this response. ‘His Excellency asked if you would read it before this evening. There will be many people there who will be keen to make your acquaintance, and he thought you would want to be abreast of the significance of the reception.’

Lise swallowed and nodded. More names to learn. ‘Of course.’

‘Is there anything here you like?’ Sylvie asked, bringing her attention back to the dresses.

Lise looked at the line-up of gowns that had been chosen for her. One was a sleeveless deep yellow slub silk, princess line with patched pockets on the hips – a surprisingly youthful touch – but yellow wasn’t her colour. Another was periwinkle-blue satin with a boat neck and full skirt, but it looked like something her mother would wear. The third was quite different – a figure-hugging sheath in white sequins with a gold sequinned collar splayed across the chest and clavicle and finishing high on the neck, Egyptian style. Everyone knew about Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton’s affair on the upcoming Hollywood film, and the world was already going *Cleopatra* crazy.

‘This one,’ she said decisively, fingering the sequins; they felt like tiny seashells against her skin. The dress would flatter her petite, slender frame, and it felt sexier and more modern than the others. She was twenty-two, after all, not forty.

‘Certainly. Bulgari has been so kind as to loan some jewellery for this dress.’ Sylvie went over to the kidney-shaped dressing table and opened a leather box, revealing a dramatic pair of turquoise cabochon earrings

rimmed with diamonds. They would add a bold pop of colour to the simple palette of the dress.

Lise looked up at her. ‘Are they really for me?’

‘Of course, madame. They were delighted to be of assistance.’

Lise blinked. She had grown up privileged in the suburbs of Geneva, and it had always been expected she would make a good match in marriage; in time she would inherit her own family’s jewels and estate. But she had never envisaged a life in which the grandest luxuries of Paris could be hers at a whim. In fact, she hadn’t thought much about any of this at all as Valentin had swept her off her feet and become her sun. She had seen nothing but him for these past few months, but now that myopic view would have to expand and let the world in.

‘The dressmaker will be up presently to make any necessary adjustments,’ Sylvie continued. ‘I apologize for the inconvenience today; you must be tired from travelling. Once your measurements have been taken, we can make sure everything from now on is tailored to fit you in advance.’

‘Okay.’

‘Would you like to take a light meal afterwards? Dinner will be late tonight, due to the reception.’

‘Will Valentin be able to join me?’

‘I believe he is in meetings all afternoon, madame.’

‘Oh. Yes, of course.’

‘Shall I prepare a table on the balcony for you? The view over the garden is very beautiful.’

Lise nodded, looking over towards the French doors. She supposed she could put some thought into ideas for the garden. And of course there was the briefing to read through too. She didn’t want to let Valentin down. Tonight was her chance to shine and make him proud.

The honeymoon was over. It was time for them both to get to work.

The evening was sultry, a Provençal heat pulsing through the pale city streets so that the men discreetly tugged at their close shirt collars and the women fanned themselves lightly. The doors to the garden had been opened and the guests were gradually migrating outside, a gathering crunch of gravel underfoot as they sought out a whispering breeze.

Lise was regretting her choice of gown. The sequins were heavy and the high neck made her feel entombed, though she had received plenty of compliments and admiring looks as Valentin introduced her to the distinguished guests. A hairdresser had styled her long tawny hair into thick braids, piling them like ropes on top of her head in a dramatic chignon. It showed off the Bulgari jewels to great effect so that Lise, when doing her own make-up, decided to lean into that and added a dramatic blue-shadowed wing to her kohl-lined eyes, à la Elizabeth Taylor. Now she wasn't sure if that too was *de trop* for the sober affair. The other women, a decade her senior at least, were all powdered and rouged, in pearls.

'You look sensational,' Valentin had said as she met him in their private drawing room before they went downstairs; but she had discerned a fractional pause.

'It's not too modish?' she asked uncertainly, her hands flying to her cheek.

That secretive smile.

'It's exactly what this place needs. Youth, vibrancy. You're a breath of fresh air,' he replied, kissing her hand, knowing better than to disturb her make-up.

She would have far preferred to curl up on the sofa with him, wearing his pyjamas and drinking merlot as they talked into the night, but she would have to do with cutting a dazzling swathe in her finery tonight instead.

Valentin introduced her first to their guests of honour. Lise had studied hard all afternoon, not only reading their biographies but asking Sylvie to bring her further details on the war of independence too. It had only ever been a background rumble in the newspapers to her, but in her new guise as the ambassador's wife, she had to step up. She caught the gleam of approval in his eyes as she conversed easily with the High Commissioner.

'Very well done, darling,' he murmured as he led her away to greet their other guests. She heard the relief in his voice.

The reception was a whirl of famous names and influential power players. He introduced her to the head of the ICRC – Red Cross – in Paris; she curtsied to the Danish crown princess and her husband; she even managed to bring the Hungarian ambassador in from the cold. The briefing notes had informed her that his country's revolution a few years earlier had left him on the outside of the diplomatic world looking in, but she engaged

him in a conversation that made his shoulders drop and soon they were laughing together, gathering a small crowd.

The minutes turned into a couple of hours as Valentin whirled her around the guests almost in a waltz, a carousel of faces before her, and she became aware of impressed looks being shared between his staff. She was doing well, she knew – better than they had anticipated. She was no political animal, and she was young, but she was a product of her class, able to sustain a conversation and feign interest where she had none. When he was called away from her side 'to deal with a small matter', she felt for a moment like a ship without its rudder, the wind slackening in her sails, setting her adrift. She was talking by then with two men: an East German official with almost no English – the default language in international gatherings such as these – and a British diplomat by the name of Tatton Wagstaff, who was rising to the challenge by conversing in 'Germanglais', as he put it, with a very scant vocabulary and the far-back accent of a king. He was the sort of smooth British gentleman who did events like this in his sleep. He spoke with a languid, wry manner, holding an opinion on everything and seemingly able to draw upon countless stories from his time at Cambridge and Sandhurst – even his boarding-school stories were diverting. Neither she nor their German friend had to do much but listen along and laugh at his jokes. He reminded her of some of her own father's friends: witty, *sang-froid* connoisseurs, well read, understated and highly adaptable to their environments.

He was regaling them with an anecdote about one of his student night-climbing expeditions up Tottering Tower, outside the Old Library, when two men approached with Valentin's faithful deputy, Otto.

'Madame Erlach, please allow me to introduce Ambassador Suarez of Spain and Señor Santos, cultural attaché at the Spanish embassy here,' Otto said as the portly, moustachioed Spanish ambassador lightly pressed her hand to his lips. Lise smiled, automatically moving for his younger companion to do the same, but he merely inclined his head, his gaze set upon the ground, and she felt embarrassed by her misstep. It had been presumptuous of her to assume.

The men all seemed to know one another, shaking hands peremptorily with guarded looks. Smiles were reserved for her alone, it seemed. Beneath the glossy veneer and these sparkling chandeliers, political tension festered, and she understood perfectly well that the faces shown to her in social

conversation would not reflect in the salon's many mirrors. She was the beautiful young hostess, wheeled out as a brief reprieve for the power players in the room before they got back to holding low-voiced conversations in corridors and shadowy corners. It wasn't so very different to the role her mother played back home; it was simply a matter of scale.

'Madame, it is an honour to make your acquaintance finally,' the Spanish ambassador said, pinching a cigar between his fingers. 'Your husband and I are old friends. We have known each other since we were at Cambridge together.'

'Really? You were there too?' The event was beginning to feel more like a university reunion.

'Yes, a few of us here, actually.' His gaze skipped lightly over the room before coming back to rest on her. 'Valentin had told me he was a lucky man convincing you to become his wife, but it is only now that I see he was being his usual modest self. He is indeed the luckiest man. But whatever induced you to marry him?'

Lise laughed at the compliment. 'It is I who am lucky,' she demurred. 'He's so clever and accomplished. He seems to just glide through the world, knowing all the answers.'

She felt aware of the younger man's scrutiny as she spoke but each time she glanced at him, he was looking at the floor or past her shoulder. She tried to recall his name – Santos, was it? She didn't recall seeing his profile in the briefing. She gave him a sidelong glance as he listened to Tatton's humorous riposte to her lauding of her husband; he didn't look like all the other diplomats. His tousled hair was worn longer than the other men's 'short back and sides' so that it touched his shirt collar, and his skin was deeply tanned, as if he'd been working in the fields.

Sensing her gaze, he looked over at her too, and she felt a small jolt in the pit of her stomach as their eyes met at last. She had expected his to be dark, almost black, even, shining like oil under a midnight moon, but to her surprise they were blue. It felt startling, like discovering the sky was green. He didn't blink, didn't stir as they stared at one another, and she had to look away first, realizing a half-second too late that a small silence was developing. Tatton's witty remarks had been delivered, and she, the hostess, was lapsing in her duties.

And yet, no words would come to her. Their group was standing just in front of the French doors, but the room felt suddenly airless in the drowsy

heat, and she was grateful her hair was off her neck. She rubbed her bare arm, aware of a light sheen on her skin, and was reminded of the nights in Greece with Valentin, their bodies slick with sweat as they lay entangled in the sheets after making love.

She looked up to find Santos still watching her and for a moment, she felt as if he could read her thoughts. Something like scorn flashed through his eyes before he looked away.

'So you honeymooned in Monaco?' Suarez asked, reviving the conversation she was failing to keep alive.

Lise swallowed, pulling herself back into this gilded room. 'Mm, yes.' She tried to rally, plastering a polite smile back onto her face. 'My first time there. Have you been?'

Suarez shook his head and shrugged. 'Non.'

'Ah, well … Interesting place.' She faltered as the conversation stalled once more. 'Valentin could only get away for a few days and … it's so convenient to get to from here.'

'Tell me, how was Valentin on the craps table?' Wagstaff asked with an amused expression. 'All in, was he?'

'Actually, now you mention it, yes,' Lise smiled, as if he'd uncovered a secret, and felt herself settling again. 'He made quite a tidy profit – which he immediately donated to a charity,' she added.

'Of course he did,' Wagstaff nodded.

Suarez guffawed, the cigar clamped now between his teeth so that it waggled as he talked. 'Of course he did!'

'You didn't know he's a gambling man?' Wagstaff asked.

'No!' She gave a mildly scandalized look. 'He's usually so cautious, but on the tables he was quite the risk-taker!'

'Well, then, I like him all the more for it,' Wagstaff said through exaggeratedly slitted eyes. 'One should never trust a man too in control of himself. There has to be a pressure-release valve somewhere. Be grateful his is cards.' He looked straight at the East German. 'What's yours, Herr Freitag?'

The East German stood to attention suddenly. 'Excuse me,' he muttered, nodding to Lise before abruptly taking his leave of their little group.

Wagstaff visibly relaxed.

'Oh dear; were we too boring, do you think?' Lise asked, alarmed by Freitag's brusqueness. It was true he had been largely excluded from the

conversation.

‘I am many things,’ Wagstaff said with consternation, ‘but boring is not one of them.’

‘I apologize, madame – it’s because of me,’ Suarez explained.

‘I’m sure that can’t be true,’ Lise protested.

‘Oh, it is,’ he nodded assuredly and with apparent satisfaction. ‘He detests me.’

She smiled, knowing perfectly well the two sat at opposite ends of the political spectrum. ‘Why? Is he an Oxford man?’

The men grinned at her little joke, even Santos breaking out a small smile, and she felt emboldened to bring him further into their interactions. Until now, he had been entirely silent.

She fixed him with a cool stare. ‘So, Señor Santos, you’re the cultural attaché at the Spanish embassy?’

‘I am.’ His voice was deeper than she had expected, his accent strong. He was slim and not tall compared to many of the men here, certainly not compared to Valentin, who was six foot three. But he was somehow magnetic; beautiful, even, like a blackbird in a flock of pigeons.

‘You’ll have to forgive me; I’m new to this world,’ she smiled. ‘What does that entail exactly, being a cultural attaché? Are you an artist by trade?’

It was the wrong thing to have said.

‘I’m an artist by heart.’

She saw a flash of anger zip through his eyes and realized she had insulted him. She opened her mouth to apologize, but Suarez was quicker.

‘Leo is one of our most acclaimed artists back home. He is a painter whose work has attracted much attention. He was commissioned for three pieces by El Caudillo, no less, for the Royal Palace of El Pardo.’

‘Oh!’ Lise was impressed, but Santos was staring, unsmiling, at a point beyond her shoulder again, as if embarrassed by the plaudits. He had retreated once more.

‘It was the general’s own suggestion that Leo be posted here to promote the Spanish artistic canon. This is a great moment for Spanish art – not just Picasso, but Dalí, Miró, Tàpies … Leo has been very active. Going into the art academies and giving masterclasses, hosting tours and workshops, mounting exhibitions and the like.’

‘Well, that’s quite a remit,’ Lise said. She caught Santos’s eye again, trying to be friendly, but he simply nodded and she felt her confidence

waver. He didn't seem interested in being her friend. 'What type of art do you paint?'

A small scowl puckered his brow. 'Type of art?'

She had put her foot back in her mouth, she realized, but if she was clumsy, he was striking her as unnecessarily rude. Beside him, his superior was looking uncomfortable, and she strove for bland amiability to put them all at ease. '… Do you paint portraits or landscapes? Are you an impressionist? A surrealist?'

There was a pause. He seemed irritated by her questions. 'At present, I'm drawn to the study of whites, Madame Erlach.'

Somehow, the way he said her name sounded like a closure to the conversation. He also hadn't given her an answer; she still didn't know what he painted. Lise could see Otto and Wagstaff in her peripheral vision, both shifting their weight, preparing to rescue her, but it was her husband she wanted. She looked around and found Valentin across the room, talking attentively with a woman in pearls. Busy.

She straightened a little, knowing she had to stand on her own two feet. She might know next to nothing about the world of diplomacy, but she wasn't unschooled in art. Far from it.

'I agree it's by far the most intriguing colour in the palette. I've always been very drawn to Sargent's use of it, actually. Everyone talks about his vivid use of colour in his portraits, but I think he was most interested in whites. *Smoke of Ambergris* is an absolutely dazzling painting; I could stare at it for hours! Do you know it?' She didn't wait for his reply. 'And as for his studies while he was travelling in Europe, once he gave up on the society portraits – well, they're just soaked in whites. *Staircase in Capri* is my favourite. What about you?'

Santos blinked as, beside him, Otto let his shoulders drop down from his ears. She hadn't let her smile slip once and had refused to be baited by the Spaniard's bad manners.

'*Staircase* is a very fine painting,' he conceded. 'And in fact, *Smoke of Ambergris* is one of my guiding inspirations.'

'Really? Well, how about that?' she said, laughing lightly to the other men and pointedly ignoring him now. 'It's official – I must have good taste if Spain's cultural attaché's influences align with my own.'

'Oh, the question of your good taste was never in doubt, Madame Erlach,' Wagstaff demurred smoothly, inclining his head slightly towards

her vogueish outfit.

Lise smiled, glancing back at Santos. She guessed he was about thirty, thereabouts. Like her, he was one of the youngest people in the room, but certainly old enough to know better. She decided to kill him with kindness. ‘You know, if whites are really your passion, Señor Santos, you should come to Switzerland. No one does white quite like us.’

‘How so?’ he frowned.

‘The Alps? We have every possible shade of white up there.’

Suarez gave a sudden, loud laugh. ‘Ah, but the French have Alps too! Are you saying yours are better?’

‘I most certainly am, Ambassador,’ she said with a provocative toss of her head.

‘But what Alpine mountain could possibly be better than Mont Blanc?’ he gasped in mock horror.

She tilted her head. ‘The Matterhorn.’

‘Checkmate, old boy!’ Wagstaff quipped just as Valentin came towards them, intrigued by the commotion.

‘I see I’m missing out on all the fun,’ he said, slipping his arm around Lise’s waist.

‘I’m afraid we have a diplomatic incident,’ Suarez said. ‘Your beautiful wife asserts that the Swiss Alps are better than the French.’

Valentin’s mouth dropped open and for once he looked lost for words. ‘… A bold claim indeed,’ he said after a moment. ‘But seeing as we all know the art of diplomacy begins at home, who am I to argue?’

The men laughed, all except Santos, who looked away into the garden again. Lise wondered why he’d come, or even why he’d accepted the position if it was beyond him to indulge in meaningless small talk. Valentin had explained to her that these events were more than they appeared – they were exercises in soft power, opportunities to forge social connections that often provided the scaffolding to support political decision-making.

‘And on that note, I shall whisk Madame Erlach away to see if she can’t broker a peace between some of our red-gloved friends,’ Valentin smiled, angling his head towards a group of dour men in military uniforms that Lise recognized as Russian.

‘How very fortunate you are, Madame Erlach,’ Wagstaff said drily.

Her heart sank at the prospect – she had been having fun here, with these men – but for her husband’s sake, it had to be done. This was what she had

signed up to, after all, in becoming his wife.

She brightened her smile and lifted her chin. ‘Gentlemen, it was a pleasure,’ she said as her husband led her away. His arm enfolded her like an eagle’s wing, making her feel protected amid all the put-on smiles – and one especially hard blue-eyed stare.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

Geneva
25 November 2026

Dulcie switched on her hazard lights and jumped out of the car. Rain was coming down in sheets, cold enough to sting her as she ran the short distance down the Rue du Mont Blanc, past the boutiques already dressed with festive displays towards the grand modernist space occupied over four floors by Christie's. She had covered her head with her coat, but she was still dripping as she pushed on the door and dashed in with a relieved smile.

The young woman at the curved white reception desk looked up at her entrance. An extravagant orchid display to her right was the only other living thing in the blank, all-white space, which struck Dulcie as strange – studied blankness – given they were in the business of buying and selling artefacts of exquisite beauty.

'Good afternoon,' the receptionist said, as Dulcie stamped her feet lightly on the mat. Droplets on this polished floor could spell a death sentence.

'Hi, hello,' Dulcie smiled, smoothing her hair back from her face as she approached the desk and composed herself with a sigh. 'Dulcie Beaumont. I've come to collect lot fifty-two from yesterday's sale?'

She produced her paid invoice, which the receptionist studied for a moment before typing into her laptop.

'Thank you. That's the Paul Signac?'

'Correct.'

'… Yes … If you would like to make your way up to the second floor, one of our associates will be there to meet you.'

'Thanks.' Dulcie ignored the lift and headed for the stairs, knowing she could do with the exercise. She was tired, having slept poorly, waking with

a gasp every time she thought she heard sounds coming from down the hall. Of course, she knew that Anna was with her grandmother – the nurse put up a single bed in the room each evening, even though they had a guest room next door – but Dulcie felt permanently on high alert, waiting for the terrible moment that she had been told was coming.

'Mademoiselle Beaumont?' A man came towards her as she reached the top step.

'Yes, hello. I've come to collect lot fifty-two.'

'Of course. Please follow me. We have everything ready for you.'

He led her into an office and indicated for her to take a seat. This space too was white with framed posters on the wall, the desk clear, sales catalogues lined up chronologically along some shelves. Tidy space, tidy mind, Dulcie thought to herself. On a table to the side was a small wooden crate, not yet sealed, and she watched as he carefully lifted out the tiny watercolour, setting it on the desk for her appraisal.

Her eyes took in the soft pointillist palette of blue, butter, coral and peach, rendering fishing boats in St Tropez. The artist had revelled in adventurous colour, painting every bit as boldly as Monet or Van Gogh, and his large-scale oils now sold for millions. This little painting wasn't in that tax bracket, but they had still paid a princely sum for something that was destined to fill a small patch of wall between a baroness's reading lamp and sofa.

'Absolutely stunning,' she sighed, giving her nod of approval that this was in fact her lot. 'Our client is delighted.'

'It is an exceptional piece.'

Dulcie reached into her bag and handed him her passport. Even though she had already paid, further anti-laundering checks were always necessary before the lot was released.

'Thank you, I'll be just a moment,' he said, slipping from the room.

Dulcie stood and walked over to the desk, admiring the painting at closer quarters while she waited. The artist's brushwork was so—

'*B'jour?*'

She looked up to find a man standing in the doorway holding a large, unwieldy white box. He shifted it in his arms. It looked heavy, patched with old strips of yellowing Sellotape.

'*Bonjour*,' she replied, straightening up as he walked in and set down the box, the corner of it missing the frame of the painting by inches. She gasped

at his recklessness, sliding the painting away, but he seemed oblivious to the near escape.

‘I would like to have these appraised,’ he said with a smile that seemed to be growing in confidence as they regarded one another. He was good-looking and very tanned – a rarity in Geneva in November – late twenties at a guess, and he exuded that easy Mediterranean charm that dished out languid, warm smiles to pretty tourists.

He opened one of the flaps, and at a glance she could see the box was filled with old photographs.

She gestured to stop him. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not who you think I am. I don’t work here.’

‘*Non?*’ A frown puckered his thick brow, and she noticed the caramel halo around his irises.

‘Excuse me!’

They both jumped as the associate spoke from the doorway. He had returned with her passport and was looking at the man with deep consternation. ‘I’m afraid you can’t be in here.’

‘I was told to come up—’

‘I’m sorry, but I’m with another client. You can’t be in here,’ the associate repeated, hurrying into the room now, lifting the box off the desk and handing it back to the stranger. ‘I must ask you to leave.’

‘But I was told to come up—’ the man repeated as the associate positioned himself in front of the desk. Or rather, in front of the painting.

Dulcie realized what he was thinking: that this was some sort of smash-and-grab robbery. In fairness, the man didn’t look like a typical Christie’s client. He was wearing an unbuttoned overcoat, jeans with tattered hems and suede Adidas trainers. He had a week-old beard and a small tattoo on his wrist, peeking out from the cuff of his dark grey jumper.

‘Please, I must ask you to step outside,’ the associate said, forcing the man back out into the corridor. ‘I’ll assist you when I have finished with my client.’

‘Okay, okay – that’s fine, I can wait.’ The stranger shrugged and leaned against the wall, still hugging the large box as the associate shut the office door on him. Dulcie looked on, embarrassed by the misunderstanding, but just before he was snatched from view, the man looked straight at her and winked.

She wasn’t prepared for the way it made her stomach pitch.

‘I apologize for that,’ the Christie’s associate murmured smoothly, handing back her passport. ‘A regrettable oversight by the reception team. I shall raise the matter with security. You are okay, I hope?’

‘Me? Yes, absolutely fine.’

‘He didn’t threaten you in any way?’

She was taken aback. ‘No, of course not.’

‘He should never have been allowed up,’ he tutted, looking around the office with a suspicious expression. His eyes fell to the unsecured Signac on the desk and he quickly reached for the wooden crate and set it back inside, positioning the lid and tapping the nails into the corners with a small hammer to secure it. ‘How will you be transporting this today?’

‘I’m parked right outside.’ She gasped as she suddenly remembered she was in a yellow zone, her hazards on. ‘Actually, I really should go before I get a ticket.’ The driving rain had dissuaded her from standing out there a moment longer than necessary.

‘I’ll ask security to escort you to your car.’

‘Oh. That really won’t be necessary,’ she said dismissively.

The man frowned. ‘We should err on the side of caution. If we were to assume the worst, then he may not be working alone. There could be accomplices on the street.’

Dulcie smiled, suppressing a laugh. ‘I really do think he just wants his photographs appraised. But thank you for your concern.’

She held her hands out for the crated Signac, and he handed it over with a troubled look. ‘Well, at the very least, please check you’re not being followed. It pays to be vigilant. I’m afraid we’ve seen everything here in our time – from ski masks and pickaxes in the middle of the night to …’ His eyes went again towards the closed door. ‘Vagrants with boxes of photographs.’

‘Ooh, ouch,’ Dulcie winced, eyes glimmering, as she offered him her hand. *Vagrant* was a little harsh, surely? ‘Thank you for your time, monsieur.’

She opened the door to find the man still leaning against the wall. Had he overheard the insults aimed at him? Seemingly not. He had set the box down by his feet, and his head was tipped back against the wall as he waited. He looked back at her through half-closed eyes, a smile coming to his lips that followed on from the wink he had given her minutes before.

‘Hey—’ he began.

‘You may come in now,’ the associate said, standing behind her in the doorway.

The man blinked, shooting her a frustrated glance as she shrugged and moved past. There was no time for flirting. Not on the associate’s watch.

‘Good luck,’ she murmured, moving down the hall and heading for the stairs.

She saw a sign for the ladies’ room on one of the doors and hesitated, regretting now the two coffees she’d had with Helda before coming out. She could wait until she got home, but she would hit rush-hour traffic at this time of day, and while she needed to get back to the car, for the sake of a quick minute now …

Her detour took all of ninety seconds but as she was heading back down the stairs she saw, to her surprise, that the handsome stranger was already ahead of her and opening the door. How on earth could he have been in and out so quickly? She had been in the ladies’ for mere moments but from the jut of his jaw, in profile, she surmised the meeting hadn’t gone well.

He caught sight of her too as he turned back slightly to manoeuvre through with the box. He stopped, his expression brightening just as the door swung back on him, knocking it from his grasp. The contents fell out, dozens of black and white photographs scattering on the ground; some fell inside on the mat, but most fell onto the glistening pavement outside.

‘*Mierda!*’ he cursed.

Dulcie gasped and ran to help him, the receptionist making no move at all from her pristine perch as she watched the chaos with a look of disdain. The box had fallen into the door jamb, wedging it open, a cold breeze blowing through.

‘Let me help,’ Dulcie said, setting down her own things and crouching by the door. She began to gather the photographs that had fallen inside, while he lunged for those lying out on the wet pavement.

The photographs were small – smaller than a standard print – and all black and white. From what she could glean of those upturned in her hand, they were just a medley of snapshots, nothing formal: local landscapes showing the lake, the distant Alps; a gaggle of geese running over a lawn; a glossy sports car with a suitcase strapped to the boot; a woman in sunglasses walking along a pavement in profile …

Most of the shots were candid, poorly framed, some blurred, others bleached by winking sunlight. Dulcie gathered them in thick clutches,

dropping them into the box as the man lunged and darted on the other side of the window for the escapees being lifted by the wind. It was still raining hard and if he had been soggy before, he was soaked through now.

She tried not to admire his athleticism in the fading light. Street lights were coming on, cars passing with their headlamps throwing beams along the road.

She reached for the stragglers on the mat, wondering if there would be any reward for her kindness. A drink, perhaps? But she immediately scolded herself. Who picked up a stranger in Christie's? And besides, she had to get back to the house. She had only just popped out on this one errand. This wasn't the time to flirt with handsome strangers.

And yet …

The door opened wider just as she picked up the last remaining photograph on the floor and the stranger lifted the box into his arms with a sigh.

'Hey,' he panted, slicking his wet hair back from his face as she rose to stand beside him. He had that smile on his lips again, and she felt that flicker of excitement in her belly as their eyes met once more. 'Thanks. You really didn't need to.'

His voice was accented. Spanish, she guessed, based on his choice of curse just now.

'No problem. You're having a bad day, I think?'

He shrugged, a hapless gesture matched with a wide smile that completely disarmed her. Unlike the sharp-suited men striding down the Rue du Mont Blanc, he looked out of place, but she felt a strong urge to go to wherever he was in place. 'Yes. Your friend was sadly unable to help me.'

'Oh, he's not my friend,' she said quickly, as she turned the last photo in her hand. It showed a view of the lake, looking past a stone balustrade and a statue of the goddess Diana with balloons tied to her hands, a vineyard extending in the expanse of land between garden and lake, grapes hanging heavily on the vines.

She frowned.

'Oh!' he quipped. 'Looks like someone's about to have a day even worse than mine.'

'Huh?' Dulcie looked up and stared down the street at the steady blink of her hazards on her own car – and beside it, the flashing glare of whirling

orange lights as a tow truck began reversing alongside.

‘No! My car!’ she cried, rushing past him and breaking into a sprint down the pavement. ‘Hey!’ she yelled, holding her arm up. ‘Stop! Hey, I’m here! I’ll move it! I’ll move it right now!’

The policeman looked back at her, shaking his head as he entered something into his notes. The tow truck had stopped in position and the driver was getting out of his cab.

‘Please!’ she beseeched the policeman. ‘You can’t tow my car. You can’t.’

‘You cannot park here, mademoiselle,’ the policeman said, unmoved by her pleas as he continued with his note-taking. ‘This is a yellow parking zone. Clearly marked.’

‘But I was only gone for a few minutes!’

‘You cannot park here at all.’

She heard the sound of machinery starting up and saw the tow truck’s mechanical arm begin to swing over, straps dangling.

‘No, please!’ she cried, clutching his arm.

A mistake.

The policeman stared down at her grip. ‘Remove your hands, m’elle,’ he said in a warning voice.

‘I’m sorry,’ she gasped, throwing her hands up in immediate surrender, mortified. Panicking. ‘I’m so sorry. But please – you cannot tow my car. I need it! I have to be able to get back home!’

‘Then you should have parked in a legal bay; that way, you would not find yourself in this predicament,’ he muttered, continuing to write the ticket.

‘But it’s a medical emergency!’

He stopped writing and looked at her properly for the first time, scanning her as if looking for bullet holes. ‘What emergency?’

Dulcie felt the tears pooling in her eyes. She swallowed, trying to compose herself. ‘It’s my grandmother. She’s dying—’

The policeman rolled his eyes, as if he’d heard this story before. The mechanical arm had swung out now and was hovering over her car, the straps sliding down the sides.

‘Please, I would never lie about such a thing! I don’t live here! I live in London, but her doctor called me last week and told me she’s in the end stage. It’s Alzheimer’s. I only came out to run this errand for work. I have to

get back home straight away.' She took a breath. How could she make him understand she was telling the truth? 'Please – it's not about the money,' she said quickly. 'I can't … I just can't spend hours getting my car unimpounded. What if I got back home and …?'

The policeman shot his hand out, stopping her from saying the words, stopping the tow truck driver too as he began pulling the straps around. There was a long pause as he regarded her, as if trying to decide whether this was truth or bold-faced desperation.

'You will still have to pay the fine.'

'Gladly! Thank you!' she gasped, reaching for her bag – but it wasn't on her. In her haste to stop the tow truck, in the distraction with the handsome stranger, she had forgotten all about it. Along with the painting.

Her stomach dropped to the ground as she looked back up the street towards Christie's. There was no sign of him by the door. Had he gone back inside?

She faltered a few steps as she looked around for a glimpse of him somewhere, anywhere … The sales associate's warnings began to echo through her mind. *We have seen everything here.*

Distraction … Accomplices … She broke into a run again, her day somehow still going from bad to worse.

'Mademoiselle!' the policeman called after her.

She got to the Christie's door, her hands splayed over the glass as she peered in and the haughty receptionist peered out. The man had gone – but her handbag and the painting were safely stowed on the desk.

She was both relieved and bitterly disappointed.

'Dammit!' she sighed, the immediate crisis over as she looked down at the photograph still in her hand. She had forgotten about that too in the momentary chaos.

But she immediately recognized what it was showing her again. She knew the view in it well. As she ought to.

It had been taken in her grandmother's house.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

Paris
3 August 1962

Lise settled herself with her back to the wall, lighting a Gauloise and sipping on it lightly as she waited for her espresso to arrive. She swung her bare, crossed leg but kept her jacket on. There was still a nip to the air here in the shadows, the early morning sun inching its way down the Boulevard Saint-Germain, solitaires of light winking through the full-headed crowns of the lime and eucalyptus trees.

She watched the Parisians walking past, all absorbed in their own narratives and wholly oblivious to her: men in narrow suits heading to offices; old women walking small dogs before the heat started to throb; children on tricycles pedalling along the broad pavements, followed by scurrying nannies en route to Les Tuileries. Lise thought about her new place in this city and how she fitted in here. As the ambassador's young wife, she held a coveted position. She lived in one of the city's best addresses, and this week alone she had met the entire French cabinet and sat in a box at the Opera. And yet it was sitting at a street café table, ignored and smoking a cigarette, that made her feel at home for the first time since arriving here.

She had slipped out of the residence – perpetually peopled, always so busy – with a sigh of relief, walking along the long avenues, alone with her shadow. Valentin had left early, of course. His schedule was so full, she had asked Sylvie whether his sleep was actually diarized. The assistant had laughed as if she were making a joke, but Lise had been quite serious. Since arriving here, her husband had had no time for a private thought, much less

a private life, and she was left wondering how it was that he'd managed to see her as often as he had during their courtship.

'You beat me to it!'

She looked up to find Eva pulling off her gloves and sinking into the chair beside her. They kissed cheeks, Eva settling herself with a small sigh as she smoothed her skirt and looked around them as if scouting for friends. Seeing they were surrounded by strangers – at least for the moment – she relaxed.

Eva was a fellow equestrian; they had met and grown up together competing on the Swiss eventing circuit and had even been roommates during the Rome Olympics. Eva had been there at her first, underwhelming meeting with Valentin, so had been surprised when Lise had called her up with news of their engagement. By then Eva had become engaged to her now-husband, Pierre de Guise, and relocated here. She was Lise's one friend in the city.

It only took Eva a moment to spot the Cartier Tank watch on Lise's wrist; she had always been a magpie, and she raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'A gift,' Lise shrugged.

'From Valentin?'

'From Cartier. Welcoming me to Paris.'

'I see,' Eva smiled, looking thoroughly amused. 'Would that we all were so lucky to have arrival gifts from Cartier.'

'Oh, I hardly think you're doing without,' Lise laughed. Eva's husband was a rising star at the private investment bank where he worked, and they lived in a grand Haussmann apartment in the 8eme.

'Still, you have made quite a splash. Everyone's talking about you, you know.' She gave Lise the side-eye.

'They are?' A smile curled Lise's lips. She couldn't deny it gave her a thrill to hear it.

The waiter came by with her espresso and Eva ordered the same, appearing to be familiar with the waiter. '*Et avec deux croissants.*'

'Oh, yes. We were at Maxim's last night,' she went on, lighting up a cigarette too and taking a drag. Her shoulders dropped a couple of inches as she slowly exhaled, looking around the street with a satisfied expression. She was wearing a cream shift and navy pumps, and her brown hair was held back by a velvet Alice band. 'All the women could talk about was your hair and your make-up and your dresses.' She twirled the cigarette around

in circles, speaking in a bored voice. ‘What was it you wore to the Opera the other night?’

Lisa had to think for a moment. ‘Dior.’

‘Well, they went crazy for that in particular. I’m very popular now they know I’m your friend. They want me to set up a lunch with you next week so they can get to know you better.’

‘Okay, great.’

‘Okay, great?’ Eva looked over at her from the corner of her eyes. ‘No, I don’t think you understand … That doesn’t happen here. Outsiders aren’t just welcomed in. I was here for five months before I had a single invitation for coffee.’

Lise patted her hand with a smile. ‘Well, then, I’m very grateful to you for introducing me to your friends.’

‘Apparently you charmed the socks off Tatty Wags too the other night.’

‘Tatty what?’

‘Tatton Wagstaff. The British diplomat.’

‘Oh, him. Yes. He was great company.’

‘Great company and knows everyone. He’s been telling anyone who’ll listen that Valentin’s pulled off some kind of miracle. The confirmed bachelor off the market with a hot, young wife.’

‘Stop it!’ Lise laughed. ‘You’ll turn me into a raging egomaniac!’

‘Well, consider your first week a success, *chérie*. Everyone’s charmed.’

‘Ooh, not quite everyone,’ Lise said with a wry shake of her head as she stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

‘No?’ Eva queried.

‘No.’ But Lise shrugged, brushing it off. She did know her debut at the embassy had been a resounding success. Valentin, Otto and Sylvie had all repeatedly told her so in the days that followed – trying to build her confidence, she suspected – and it irritated her that she kept dwelling on that one small stress fracture, Leo Santos. She had even looked him up in the briefing file the next morning as she took breakfast, alone, but there had been no reference to him. When she had queried it with Sylvie, she had been told he often came as Suarez’s plus-one; he was well enough known to them to pass security but not of sufficient seniority, importance or even interest to merit a profile summary. In other words, he wasn’t one of the big guns in the room. Which had been quite evident.

‘So how is it, really?’ Eva asked, lowering her voice. ‘Being married to one of the city’s most influential men.’

‘Not according to him. Valentin says he’s just a facilitator in a good suit.’

‘Which is exactly what the truly influential men say. Pierre says real power is never broadcast. Only the minnows shout.’ Eva watched her more closely. ‘Be honest with me, Lise – we’ve been friends for too long and I know you too well, my dear. Paris loves you. But do you love Paris?’

‘Well, it’s all a lot busier than I expected,’ Lise admitted. ‘I mean, I knew he had a big job, but I didn’t realize his job was his entire life.’

‘Define *entire life*.’

‘He sleeps for four hours a night.’ Lise didn’t add that he hadn’t shared a bed with her once in the past week, crashing out in his own bedroom in the small hours – even though he had assured her the separate rooms were just a formality – and getting up again before she’d stirred. Even when they’d gone to the Opera and she’d been a little tipsy on champagne, putting his hands on her in the back of the car and whispering filthy suggestions in his ear, he had promised he would come straight through to her after he made a call; only the minutes had passed and when she went to find him, he was asleep at his desk, ‘an issue’ somewhere having unexpectedly blown up.

‘But I’m not complaining,’ she shrugged. ‘It’s just an adjustment, that’s all. Everything was so dreamy and romantic before, meeting up in whichever city he was visiting. Once the hotel door closed, he was all mine – but here, there are always people behind every door, wanting his attention.’

‘That’s the problem with embassy life. You live where he works,’ Eva said with a weary tone, as though she had the same problem herself. They watched as the waiter set down her coffee and the two pastries. She pushed one of them towards Lise and began tearing lightly at her own. ‘You know, you should get a place that is just yours alone. For the two of you. A retreat. The city can be so incestuous after a while. I’ve convinced Pierre to look for a place by the sea. He’s keen on St Tropez, but I’d prefer Ile de Ré. Or even Cap Ferret, I can’t decide.’

‘I love it there.’

‘Which?’

‘All.’

‘Good, then you must come to stay, whichever we end up in. And perhaps you get the place in St Tropez instead?’

Lise laughed. ‘I think I should let some time pass first. We’ve only been married a few weeks. It’s a bit soon to be asking for a second home!’

Eva grinned. ‘Nonsense! For you, he’d do anything. And besides, that’s the benefit of marrying an older man. Valentin’s already made his money, got the fancy position – and it’s not like he can afford to waste any more time! He waited long enough to get hitched. He’s got some catching-up to do, if you ask me!’

‘You’re incorrigible.’

‘It’s why you love me …’ She saw Lise fall still, her eyes tracking a couple on the other side of the street. ‘What is it?’

‘Isn’t that … Isn’t that Picasso?’ Lise asked under her breath as Eva tore off another corner of croissant. Her father considered him the most important living artist of their time.

‘Oh, yes.’ Eva shrugged, glancing over at the distinctive, diminutive figure walking by with a much younger woman. ‘You often see him around; you’ll get used to it. He’s a regular at Les Deux Magots. Wouldn’t be seen dead in here, of course.’

The other café, just a block away, was Café de Flore’s great rival. It was a fact of life that Parisians had to (unofficially) pledge loyalty to one or the other. Les Deux Magots was known for being a harbour for the left-wing establishment; Café de Flore, further up the street, was preferred by the right.

Lise noticed even the bored Parisians surreptitiously staring as the artist and his young companion walked past. They weren’t flashily dressed, but there was an aura about them that drew the eye.

‘That’s his new wife,’ Eva continued carelessly. ‘I forget her name. Someone did tell me.’

‘She looks half his age.’ It made Lise’s own fourteen-year age gap with Valentin seem almost irrelevant.

‘And the rest. But what does he care? Apparently he’s a charming bastard. Brilliant, but cruel. Doesn’t he sound just wonderful?’ Eva shot her a wicked look. ‘Don’t fall in love with him. You do love an older man.’

‘I only have eyes for my husband,’ Lise grinned, still watching Picasso as he strolled away. ‘Have you met him?’

‘Not yet. But it’s only a matter of time.’ She kicked Lise’s leg lightly. ‘No doubt you’ll be having dinner with him within the week.’

‘I hope not. I’ve already met one temperamental Spanish artist this week, and that’s quite enough for me.’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Oh yes? Who was that?’

‘Leo Santos.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘I met him at the embassy on my first night. He’s the cultural attaché for Spain and so unbelievably arrogant and imperious, I couldn’t say a single thing right,’ she complained. ‘He was determined to find offence in everything.’

‘Really? How stupid of him to insult the ambassador’s wife.’

Lise sighed as she lit another cigarette and sank into the memories of their conversation. It had played in a loop on her mind ever since that night. She remembered his averted gaze and the shock of his stare; somehow, both had bothered her. ‘Do you know, he was so conceited that when I asked him what kind of painting he did – you know, landscape, portrait? A normal question – he said he was interested in “studying whites”.’

‘Whites?’ Eva frowned.

‘He was pretentious, just trying to embarrass me. Treating me like some kind of idiot.’

‘Oh, no.’ Eva shot her a knowing look. She knew Lise’s background and the paintings that hung on the walls of her family home back in Geneva. ‘What did you do?’

Lise shrugged. ‘Started waxing on about Sargent’s whites – *Capri Staircase*, *Smoke of Ambergris* … You should have seen his face.’

Eva laughed. ‘He won’t do that again.’

‘He won’t get a chance. I don’t think there are any pressing diplomatic incidents with Spain right now,’ she said wryly. ‘So hopefully our paths won’t have to cross again.’

Eva, leaving a third of her croissant untouched, sat back in her chair and reached a hand over for a drag of Lise’s cigarette. ‘I’m trying to cut back,’ she said by way of explanation.

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, sharing the cigarette as they watched people pass by. Hemlines were short here; shorter than back home, the women walking with a carefree air.

‘*Smoke of Ambergris* …’ Eva mused. ‘That’s the one where the woman’s in the all-white tunic and hood, standing by the censer?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘I saw it a few months ago. Sensational painting. Those little flecks of orange.’

‘You actually saw it in the flesh?’ Lise was surprised. ‘When did you go to America?’

‘I didn’t. There’s a Sargent exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo at the moment. A shared initiative with the New York Met. Pierre and I went to the opening night back in May. It’s good, you should go before the run ends.’

‘When’s that?’

‘Not sure.’

‘Ah.’ Lise watched a sparrow forage for crumbs under one of the café tables. ‘What are you doing after this?’

‘I have a hair appointment in an hour.’ Eva checked her watch. ‘I should get going soon. Traffic’s bad around Pont Neuf at the moment. Roadworks. What about you? Any plans?’

‘No, nothing at all until six,’ she replied, stretching happily.

‘What’s happening then?’

‘A reception for the climbers who ascended the west face of the Matterhorn.’

Eva pulled a rictus smile and held it. ‘Funnnn.’

‘I know, lucky me!’ Lise laughed, but she felt a small tightening in the pit of her stomach, a kernel of dread beginning to seep like ink through water. Already she sensed how the evening would play out. These functions ran to tight rules in their timings, dress code, even the accepted topics of conversation. She knew how it would be before it had even begun.

They separated twenty minutes later, making promises to have that lunch next week before walking away in opposite directions. Lise headed for the river and came upon it slinking heavily like a bronzed serpent in the winking sunlight. She walked slowly along the Quai Voltaire, past the artists dabbing at easels with their long brushes; one man playing the violin in a trenchcoat, a cap filled with coins on the ground and a dog sleeping by his feet; street vendors sitting by their stalls, the boards pulled back to display racks of old books, vinyls, miniature oils.

She walked without intention or destination, but everywhere she looked her gaze fell upon lovers, their legs hanging over the quai, heads on shoulders, arms looped; sitting cross-legged on the grass as they faced each other, talking intently or feeding one another strawberries. She smiled as if

she was in on their secrets, knowing she was one of them and wondering where Valentin was right now, somewhere in this small, pulsating city.

The sun was climbing quickly now and the morning haze burning off; hard-edged shadows criss-crossed on the pavements as she walked, snatched conversations coming to her ear and falling away again, the low rumble of traffic a background noise filling her head. On the water, the boats motored past, tourists sitting on plastic bucket seats, cameras around their necks as they gazed at the great landmarks: Notre-Dame, the Tour Eiffel, the Louvre, the Ile de la Cité. And at her. She wondered briefly what they saw as their eyes lingered on her long hair fluttering in the light breeze, her short skirt flashing tanned legs. Did they think her a Parisian? Did she fit here?

The tip of the Eiffel Tower was beginning to probe above the grey rooftops that stretched ahead of her, and she decided to head for it as she walked along the Quai d'Orsay and past the old railway terminus. She hardly dared admit to anyone that the wife of the Swiss ambassador to Paris had never been up the city's most famous monument. But as she got to the Pont de l'Alma, she looked across the water and saw the brutalist hulk of the Palais de Tokyo. She stopped, remembering Eva's remarks about the travelling Sargent exhibition.

A glance at her watch told her it was only eleven twenty, the day still stretching ahead of her like a promise. She had time to drop in there first, didn't she? It was a shame to go indoors and remove herself from this fine day, but it would be worse still to miss the chance of seeing one of her favourite paintings while it was on loan here. She could just visit the one painting and be on her way again.

She crossed the river and headed for the concrete monolith, feeling enlivened now she had a destination. It was like a modernist Acropolis, and people looked no bigger than ants as they moved among the vast, towering columns.

She bought a ticket and ran up the steps, wandering through the stripped-back concrete halls to the salon that held the Sargent masterpieces. It felt like the wrong space entirely for a Sargent to be hanging – he had painted for Victorian parlours and ballrooms, for rooms filled with velvet cushions and silk rugs – and yet, as she rounded a corner and saw from a distance the piece she had been looking for, the background faded away. It didn't matter at all where it was hanging, she could see only the richness of the work on

the canvas: the masterful brushwork, the exquisite layering of whites which somehow became colours as they were set against themselves, cast as greys, blues, peach, violet, lime … The central figure was enigmatic, her face all but obscured by her deep hood, but there was the artist's characteristic rendering of feminine delicacy in her arms as she held up the brim.

It was even more beautiful than Lise had anticipated. She held her breath as she scanned it, taking in the smaller details as her eyes adapted. She loved the proportions Sargent had chosen, the entire upper third, almost half, of the canvas dedicated to pure empty space, to more white that wasn't white …

Lise came back to herself, the painting falling away from her again, as her intuition pricked and she became aware of a weight on her back. Not a physical load, but … a heat, almost.

It was a sensation she already knew, she realized, as she turned slowly to find a blue gaze fixed on her. She caught her breath as the man rose from the bench and walked over.

'Señor Santos. What a coincidence,' she said, swallowing nervously and wringing her hands as he stopped in front of her. There was none of Tatton Wagstaff's witty repartee to help her out today, no Valentin to swoop in and take her away.

'Not really.'

His reply was blunt but not necessarily wrong. They had, after all, discussed this very painting, and they had seemingly both discovered it was in this city for a limited time. Still, the chances of overlap had to have been infinitesimally small.

She smiled back at him, still an ambassador's wife even when she was off duty. 'Have you been here long?'

'Yes.'

She half turned back towards the painting. 'She's incredibly beautiful. Even more than I thought she would be.'

'She is,' he agreed.

She turned back to find him watching her intently. Clearly, he wasn't alluding to the painting. 'Did you … did you come here as part of your work on whites?'

He shook his head.

A turgid silence bloomed, which he seemed disinclined to fill. His terse expression, his challenging stare … Lise felt even her polished manners

beginning to wilt in the arid atmosphere of their exchange.

'Well, I don't want to intrude. You must be busy—' she said, beginning to step away.

'I was waiting for you.'

His words stopped her. 'What?'

'I've been waiting here for you.'

'But …' She stared at him in bewilderment. Had their testy conversation rattled him as much as her, then? The grit in the gloss of their encounter an irritation neither one of them had been able to ignore? 'But how did you know I would come?'

'I knew you would.'

'But how?' she pressed. She gave an astonished laugh. 'I only found out the painting was even here this morning!'

He shrugged. 'It was just a matter of when.'

She blinked. Exactly how long had he been waiting? It had been a week since they met. He couldn't have been coming here all that time, surely? 'But … why?'

'Because I had to see you again.'

'I don't understand,' she said quietly.

'Yes, you do.' There was a grain to his voice as he spoke, his bold words pushing past her polite artifice, and she understood at last that the intensity she had seen in his eyes that first night – and could still see there now – was neither scorn nor contempt. She knew what it looked like when a man wanted her.

'But you … You made your irritation with me perfectly clear the other night.'

'Not with you. I was angry with the situation.'

'Situation?'

'You. Married to him.' His mouth curled into a soft sneer. 'It's ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous?' The word fell as a gasp. 'What would you know about any of it? He's my husband and I love him.'

'He's too old for you.'

She shook her head. 'He's not.'

'You don't love him.'

'Yes, I do!' She could hardly believe he was arguing this with her.

'He doesn't love you.'

‘How dare you!’ Lise cried, trying to catch her breath, rattled by his nerve, his speed, his ready list of reasons why her marriage was ridiculous. ‘This is madness! It’s none of your business. You know nothing about me.’

‘That is true.’ He didn’t try to deny it. ‘But I’m supposed to.’

She stared at him, still feeling that draw towards him she had felt from the very first moment and tried to ignore. ‘You shouldn’t have come here,’ she said in a lowered voice. ‘I’m married – whether you approve of it or not.’

‘I don’t.’ He blinked back at her, those blue eyes boring into her own, so unapologetically yearning that she had to look away. How could he look at her like that – as if he already knew her? Owned her?

‘Stop it. Don’t look at me like that.’

She turned away, looking around the cold space. For all its neoclassical pretensions, it had a harsh, communist feel, as if spies might be hiding around every corner.

Were they?

She imagined eyes upon them, people watching … If anyone were to see them here, they could all too easily misunderstand. Did this disagreement sound like a lover’s spat? Rumours would fly around the city within hours. Valentin would be humiliated.

Santos stepped towards her, closing the gap between them once more. ‘Come back with me.’ His voice was low, the bass vibrating through her chest.

‘Back where?’ She caught a trace of his scent and it seemed to catch upon her skin with tiny prickles, pulling her in.

‘To my apartment, of course.’

Of course? As if all this was a foregone conclusion? ‘You’re mad,’ she breathed.

‘No.’ He shook his head slowly, watching her fluster grow, the blush gathering in her cheeks. ‘Just honest. You should try it.’

She felt her anger kick in at that, and she drew herself a little taller as she fell back on the diplomatic art of mildness. If Valentin had shown her anything this past week, it was that only water could put out fire.

She looked directly at him, forcing herself to hold eye contact as she spoke. ‘Señor Santos, I don’t know what’s given you the impression that I’m … that we’re …’ She couldn’t even say the words. ‘But I apologize if

there's been a misunderstanding or I've somehow given the wrong impression.'

He watched as she retreated behind the cold, hard shell of manners and his gaze felt like hands, reaching for her.

'For what it's worth, I won't make any mention of this to my husband,' she murmured. Would threats keep him back? She dared another look at him. Instantly regretted it. His eyes scorched her. '… There – there's no need to make a mountain out of a molehill. I know you wouldn't want things to be awkward, nor to jeopardize your position at your embassy …' It was her trump card, but it drew nothing. 'We'll just pretend this never happened … Yes?'

He didn't respond. He wouldn't go along with her plan. He just let the silence draw out as his eyes roamed her face, her pleas falling at their feet.

'Okay, so … goodbye, then, Señor Santos.' She turned to go but his hand caught hers and held it there, his grip loose. She could easily have pulled away.

But she didn't.

His thumb stroked the underside of her wrist, her frantic pulse playing a staccato beneath the thin skin. '*Hasta luego*, Lise.'

She felt a heat rising through her at the uninvited intimacy of his touch upon her, his impertinent familiarity, the promise that was held in those words. She had to force her feet to move, to spirit her away from him, and she listened to the sound of her own heels clipping delicately on the polished concrete floors, a sole token of femininity in this barren place.

But distance didn't matter now; they both knew that. It didn't matter how far she went, nor how fast, because a seed had been planted – and if only given light and water, anything could grow, anywhere.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

Lake Geneva
25 November 2026

‘What do you mean, you just left the painting on the ground?’

Helda looked at her in horror across the kitchen table, her red hands splayed out, cassoulet untouched between them. She looked up at her husband as if it must make more sense to him, but Georges, standing by the sink as he towel-dried his hands, could only shrug, his spaniel eyes full of concern.

‘I was trying to stop my car from being towed,’ Dulcie explained. If anyone was going to understand her predicament, it would be the old chauffeur of over sixty years.

‘How much had you paid for it?’ Georges asked, sinking into the chair beside her. Behind him, on the counter, the bars on the baby monitor played green. Her grandmother was still sleeping, had been all afternoon. Her panic to get back here had all been for nought.

Dulcie hesitated. ‘Eighty-nine thousand euros.’

‘Eighty-nine …?’ Helda cried, stricken.

‘It’s not my money, obviously,’ she said quickly.

‘Which makes it even worse. Imagine if that man had just taken it!’

‘I know, but there was a lot going on. I got distracted.’

‘You have insurance, yes?’ Georges asked in a sombre voice.

‘The company does, of course. Worst-case scenario, the client would have been reimbursed and … well, Quinn would have had something to say about it.’

Husband and wife swapped looks at her sanguine response. Helda reached for the serving spoon with a despairing shake of her head and

began to serve out.

‘Look, all’s well that ends well,’ Dulcie said irritably, wishing she’d never even mentioned it now and trying to get to the actual point of her story. ‘I’m more interested in *this*.’ She tapped the photograph of the Villa Mirelle terrace with her finger. ‘Why did that guy have it?’

‘You don’t know who he was?’ Georges asked.

‘Never seen him before in my life. But he wasn’t much older than me, and the photographs were mainly black-and-whites, like this. He had a whole box of them.’

‘Perhaps they are old family pictures, then, and someone in his family visited here once. Or maybe they worked here?’

‘That’s what I wondered.’ She thanked Helda with a smile as her dinner was set down before her. ‘You’ve both been here since, what, the sixties?’

‘Your great-grandfather employed me in sixty-two, when I was seventeen,’ Georges said. ‘Helda came the following year.’

‘So, then, you might even have known the people in the photographs?’

He shrugged. ‘Possibly. We’d need to see their faces, of course.’

Dulcie frowned as she thought back. ‘I didn’t notice any when I was picking them up off the floor – not that I was really paying attention.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Do you think he’s got any more of this place?’

‘How would we know?’ Helda chuckled, the three of them beginning to eat.

‘He might even have some of Granny?’

Georges shot her a curious look. ‘Highly unlikely.’

‘But if this person in his family came to the house, it’s not an unreasonable stretch to think he might have some pictures of her, is it?’

Georges drank some wine rather than knocking her suggestion back. Was she grasping at straws? Trying to find a different way to hold onto her grandmother even as she slipped away, minute by minute?

‘It’s a shame you didn’t get the fellow’s name,’ Helda said instead.

‘I know. I’m kicking myself.’

‘Would Christie’s have it?’ Helda asked.

‘Doubtful. He didn’t seem to get as far as registering as a client. He came in speculatively and they turned him away. He was in and out before I was.’

‘But if they let him into the building, they must have taken a name, at least.’

‘Hmm,’ Dulcie mused. ‘Maybe. Perhaps I’ll call them tomorrow and ask.’

‘Or go in there—’

‘Park properly this time, if you do,’ Georges warned, wagging a finger at her.

Dulcie shook her head. ‘Oh, I’m definitely not going back in myself. It’s another hour out of the house. I can’t risk it.’

‘Dulcie, go out and get some air,’ Helda said. ‘It would be good for you to get away from here for a bit. You cannot keep a vigil around the clock. It will be fine. You know we’d always call you if there was any change in her condition at all.’

Dulcie bit her lip, feeling torn. Waiting for death felt so macabre; the endless hours sitting by her grandmother’s bed, reading books aloud to her, holding her hand while she slept. All she ever wanted was for her to wake up, but whenever she did, her grandmother’s confusion and fear were so great, she just wanted her to go straight back to sleep again. They were all caught in a half-life, and Dulcie felt guilty at what a relief it had been to escape the house for a few hours, yesterday at the auction and again today. ‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

A distant knock sounded at the front door. Georges dropped his cutlery with a sigh. ‘Max,’ he muttered. ‘I was expecting him hours ago.’

Dulcie watched as he disappeared into the hall, his footsteps sounding into the shadows. ‘Max?’

‘Hedge-cutter,’ Helda murmured. ‘Come for his money.’

‘Ah.’

They continued to eat, but Dulcie’s mind was still on the box of photos; or more specifically, the guy holding them. The truth was she had felt the chemistry between them just in the few moments they had interacted, and it had been the first time she’d felt anything since her last relationship had ended – badly – in the summer. She didn’t have a great track record when it came to romance.

Georges came back through several minutes later.

‘What is it?’ Helda asked, taking in his expression.

Dulcie looked up too. ‘Was it Max?’

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘It was an elderly gentleman, asking for your grandmother.’

‘Really?’ Dulcie looked at the wall clock. It was well after eight – late for an unexpected visitor. ‘What did he want?’

‘He asked to speak with her.’

‘Did he say what about?’

‘No. He said he could only speak to her.’

‘Well, did you tell him she is indisposed – and likely to remain that way?’

‘I said she was sleeping.’ He sat back down again at the table, draping the napkin over his lap. ‘I didn’t want to give him any personal details about her health when we don’t know who he is.’

‘What was his name?’

‘He wouldn’t give it, but he said he’d drop by again. He’s staying locally, he said.’

Dulcie shrugged as she looked over at Helda. ‘Curious, turning up unannounced like that, don’t you think?’

‘Mm. Perhaps he’s heard the news on the grapevine and wants to say his goodbyes to her in person. Your grandmother was a very popular figure. She knew everyone, and they all knew her.’ Helda sighed. ‘Back in those days, this house was permanently filled with people and flowers and parties … It’s so sad how quiet it’s become.’

Dulcie’s gaze fell again to the black-and-white image on the table of one such summer’s day, its lushness still held in perpetuity – but its story long since muted.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

Paris
16 August 1962

The driver stopped alongside the pavement and jumped out, opening Lise's car door as she finished checking her appearance in her compact. 'Madame de Guise's apartment, Madame Erlach,' he said, holding his head up formally as she stepped out, smoothing the creases from her dress. It was another new one, from Chanel this time – pale blue tweed with a black contrast edging at the neck and armholes. She had had the seamstress bring it up an extra two inches beyond her normal length to show a little more thigh. The woman had raised an eyebrow as if to remind her she was an ambassador's wife, but that had only emboldened Lise further. She was quite determined that being married to an older man didn't mean she had to dress twenty years older than her age.

'*Merci*, Pierre,' she said, walking towards the building, where a uniformed doorman was already moving to open the door for her. '*Merci*.'

She stepped into the old, caged lift and drew the door across, pressing for the fourth floor and holding on – as per Eva's instructions – in anticipation of the violent lurch that came with operation of the machine. Gears began to grind somewhere far below and she stood patiently as she was slowly levered up through the heart of the building, past marble floors and glossy black doors with polished brass numbers. She caught snippets of the lives of the residents here – a shiny bicycle propped against the wall of number 3, a well-watered potted pelargonium outside number 7, two spotless pairs of children's wellington boots placed outside number 9.

The door to Eva's apartment was flanked by small topiaried yews cut into sharp obelisks. Her hostess was already waiting for her, a martini in hand,

as the lift creaked to a halt.

Lise pulled back the grille and stepped out. They embraced lightly. It had scarcely been two weeks since their coffee at Café de Flore, but it felt like so much had happened, and Lise wished it could have been just the two of them having lunch today. She would have liked to tell her friend about Leo Santos's scandalous proposal at the Palais de Tokyo; his outrageousness in waiting for her, for days supposedly, beside the Sargent painting; his blatant and unapologetic hunger for her; the way he'd held her arm lightly, his skin on hers like a promise … She wanted to tell her friend all of it. She knew Eva would be every bit as stunned as she had been, and then angry at his presumption, and then they would laugh together and reduce it to something ridiculous.

That was what was needed to take the heat out of it, because lying alone in her huge bed and thinking it over in the moonlight would never bring a solution. Nor peace. And certainly Valentin was offering no distraction.

'Just a warning, Chantale is on the warpath.'

'Chantale?'

'She caught her maid with the postboy today,' Eva murmured. Lise was about to ask why this liaison should be of concern to Chantale – whoever she was – but Eva looped her arm and led her into the apartment, distracting her at once.

It had high ceilings, with polished walnut parquet laid in Versailles-style flags. The entrance hall was entirely white, with just a single table draped in burnt orange velvet set in the centre and a froth of orchids spilling from a marble urn; on the back wall hung a giant Warhol of a red Coca-Cola bottle. It was a curious mix of antique and modern, but somehow it worked.

They walked into the reception room, a huge space flooded with light thanks to triple arched French windows fronting onto a narrow balcony. It too was all white, but where those ornate traceries of the ambassador's residence were delicately picked out in gold, here they were left to sink back rather than stand out. A plush circular ivory rug grounded the room, with a blonde suede contemporary curved modular sofa set atop it. The effect was unashamedly modern and youthful, a testimony to how the new elite could spend their wealth. Lise felt an unexpected jab of jealousy; suddenly her home felt fussy and old-fashioned.

Faces turned towards them as they walked in, eyes grazing her up and down as they took in the details of today's look, and Lise was glad to have

shortened her dress the extra two inches. If her home was old-fashioned, she at least was not.

'Everyone, my old friend Lise Merian – now Madame Erlach,' Eva said, presenting her proudly.

The women rose, all as sinewy and taut as racehorses, with tiny wrists and ankles and hair that gleamed with frostings of spray. Names were supplied – Coralie, Emmanuelle, Beatrice, Chantale, Marguerite – as cheeks were proffered and kisses fluttered into the sky like airy doves.

A martini was placed into her hand, and she saw a space had been reserved for her on one of the two armchairs – Eva was on the other one – as if this was an interview. Which perhaps it was.

At first the conversation was polite and formulaic – how was she finding Paris? Had she visited much before? Was her family the Merians of Merian's wine? Was her father the art collector Leopold Merian? How had she come to meet her husband? Was she enjoying diplomatic life? Was it terribly tedious?

'So, have you met Picasso yet?' Eva smiled.

'No, I'm sorry to say,' Lise chuckled. 'Have you?'

'Not yet. Tell us, who have you met this week who's been fascinating?' Eva tossed her head prettily, giving her the floor and inviting her to shine and entertain them all.

'Well, a lot of politicians, certainly. And actually, I met James Donovan yesterday. We had a lunch for him. Valentin admires him greatly and says he's a "metadiplomat", although I don't really know what that means.' She gave a small smile, still in thrall to the world in which her husband moved. The women looked back at her with blank expressions.

'Who?' Eva asked after a moment.

'He's the American lawyer who has been tasked with negotiating with Castro for the return of the Bay of Pigs prisoners …?'

At that, a collective murmuring of distaste erupted from the women. The CIA-backed failed invasion a year earlier, intended to overthrow Castro's communist government, had caused such shockwaves around the world that even the ladies of Paris held an opinion on it.

'He is important, this American, *bien sûr*, but perhaps not fascinating?' one of the women – Chantale? – murmured. Lise felt a slash of embarrassment at having fallen short of impressing them. In this room, fascination trumped importance.

‘Is Valentin going to be assisting with these negotiations too?’ Eva asked, trying to rescue her.

‘I think he is merely standing by as a neutral intermediary.’

‘Well, if there’s one thing we can always rely on the Swiss for, it’s sitting on the fence,’ Beatrice sighed.

Lise was taken aback by the sudden, snide comment. Political neutrality was a leading principle of the Swiss constitution, guided by experience and collective national will, not apathy or cowardice.

She looked over at Beatrice, wondering if perhaps she had misunderstood, but Beatrice was reaching for her martini with an unapologetic expression as their eyes met. Lise guessed her to be perhaps ten years plus her senior; she was classically beautiful and self-assured, shoulder-length auburn hair curling softly, luminous pearls at her throat. She sat, catlike, almost purring with quiet satisfaction that her paw swipe had drawn blood, claws slowly retracting again.

Lise studied her more closely, a vague sense growing within that she had seen her once before. She tried to recall where or when exactly, but there had been so many lunches, receptions and dinners since arriving in the city, it was difficult to keep track … Had she inadvertently slighted Beatrice by not recognizing her?

‘Well, I can see why Valentin is so proud of you. It’s wonderful that you take such an interest in his work,’ Coralie said, smoothing over the interruption, but there was condescension in her words.

‘Shall we eat?’ Eva asked, breaking the silence that had fallen on the group.

Lunch was light: asparagus, foie gras, lemon sorbet – but the martinis had been followed with wine and the awkwardness was soon forgotten, tongues loosening quickly. Lise was grateful for the opportunity to fall back from the glare of the spotlight and listen in as everyone discussed summer vacation plans and upcoming appointments with the design ateliers.

Chantale returned to expressing her opprobrium over catching her maid *in flagrante* with the postboy.

‘In the pantry?’ Emmanuelle asked, aghast. ‘But that is so unsanitary.’

‘As I said to them,’ Chantale said with an indignant shrug. ‘I was left with no choice but to dismiss him.’

‘But not Marie?’ Coralie asked with a look of deep concern.

‘No, of course not,’ Chantale replied, looking just as perturbed. ‘Because it is becoming so difficult to find good maids.’

‘You don’t need to tell me. She is irreplaceable.’

Eva cleared her throat lightly. ‘And his position? I assume you have a replacement in mind for him?’

‘*Peut-être*,’ Chantale replied enigmatically, one manicured nail tapping on her wine glass. Something in the curve of her coy smile told Lise that she wasn’t talking about the young man’s postal duties, and as she saw the looks sparkling in the other women’s eyes, she finally understood the real cause of Chantale’s cold anger.

Lise reached for her glass, unwittingly drawing attention back to herself.

Emmanuelle watched her. ‘*Et vous*, Lise? Will you take a lover?’

The question was asked so politely, Lise at first thought she had misheard. But when she realized she hadn’t, she laughed, shocked. ‘N-no, of course not.’

The women seemed confused. ‘Of course not?’

‘Well, I am a newlywed. Only just married,’ she said, as baffled by their bewildered looks as they were by her words. ‘Valentin and I are in love.’

She was used to people being thrown by their age difference, but did it really need to be spelled out? They had been married less than a month. How could she tell them, without causing offence, that any shortcomings that might be found in their marriages were not to be found in her own?

Eva came to her rescue. ‘Things are quite different in Switzerland, you understand. It is not so normal over there,’ she explained to the French women. She looked back at Lise. ‘But here, it is the modern way. It used to be only men who enjoyed private liaisons, but now … Why not? So long as one is discreet, of course.’ She pressed a finger to her lips.

‘Of course,’ Lise murmured, looking at her old friend. Did her casual acceptance of such things indicate she too had a lover? Eva and Pierre had been married only just over a year. When was it acceptable for such things to start? If ever?

‘It can be very refreshing for a marriage, you know,’ Coralie explained with a tiny shrug of her narrow shoulders, as if reading Lise’s private disdain. ‘In fact, some are only held together because of them.’

‘That … is good to know,’ Lise said mildly, but the memory of Leo Santos was running through her mind unbidden. Was that why he had been so bold with her? Had he assumed that she too was a modern young

woman, inclined to break her marriage vows within weeks of taking them? She bridled again at his nerve. His impertinence. His bold-faced stares.

There was a pause, the women all looking at one another.

'We are joking,' Emmanuelle said, leaning in slightly. 'It is a joke.'

'It is?' Lise asked.

'*Bien sûr.*'

'Oh!' Lise exhaled with a small laugh. 'Yes, I see. Thank goodness.'

'You are newlyweds. In the throes of bliss. Of course you don't need a lover. Valentin is a wonderful man. You must be very happy.' Emmanuelle patted her hand.

'Thank you. We are.' She swallowed, holding her smile as the conversation moved on to the most recent performance of *Aida* at the Opera, but Lise was only half listening. Had it been a joke? Or was she being patronized again? She felt rattled by the constant switchbacks in tone and direction, unable to get a firm footing. She had thought diplomacy was hard, tiptoeing across hostile political divisions with only a coupe of champagne in her hand, but these women were every bit as unsettling as monosyllabic military aides and indignant consuls. They made pleasantries, but their smiles were cold and their words hollow. Jokes came with poisonous barbs. She had come here expecting to make friends, but sitting here now, she felt like a mouse in a viper pit.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lake Geneva
26 November 2026

The windows always rattled when the wind blew from the east, storms whipping the lake into a lacy froth. The water was a battleship grey, the mountains snatched from view as the very last leaves were blown from the trees and danced through the air like confetti.

Dulcie stood staring out from her grandmother's bedroom as Anna carried out her medical duties. Her grandmother had been sleeping for most of the morning, drifting a few times into minimal consciousness before dropping away again. Dulcie had tried to catch her in those moments, to hold her gaze and say her name and try to pull her back into the room; but her grandmother was like a balloon tethered to the earth by a single string.

She glanced back at the figure in the bed, her pale hand resting on top of the covers. It was so light to hold it was as if the bones had been hollowed, the fingers gently curled like a marionette's with the strings cut. Her grandmother looked at peace when she slept, which was most of the time now. It was distressing during the brief periods of consciousness, when her confusion led to panic and anger; but like the winter days outside these walls, her sun was setting earlier every evening, and it felt like soon there would only be darkness.

Her decline had been long and slow since her diagnosis – Dulcie no longer took that as a blessing – and although Anna had warned her what to expect on this return, there had been no denying her grandmother's deterioration had been a cruel shock. The hostility was breathtaking, with crazed accusations and frantic attacks followed almost immediately by doe-like docility and blank eyes. Not once in the nine days Dulcie had been

back here had her grandmother remembered her name or known who she was.

Dulcie did what she could to fill the hours and provide comfort. She read aloud to her and played her favourite songs on the old-fashioned record player – there was something so evocative about that faint scratch as the needle touched the vinyl, the slight wobble in the sound from the wonky turntable. But still the minutes trudged past with indifference, shadows creeping around the room in silent play.

'Dulcie? A call for you.'

She turned at the sound of her name to find Helda holding out her mobile. She tried to make a point of leaving it on the kitchen table; she didn't like bringing it into the bedroom. The temptation to scroll would be too great, and that felt disrespectful under the circumstances.

'Thanks. Who is it?' she asked as she crossed the room.

'Not sure. No name came up.'

Dulcie felt a thrill fizz in her stomach as she reached for the phone. She would never normally accept a number not in her contacts, but this meant it was either a home insulation salesman or …

'Hello?' she said.

There was a pause. 'So it is you. The English girl from yesterday.'

She bit her lip as she recognized his voice too. 'Yes. Thank you for calling me back.' She pushed her hair back behind her ear, catching Helda giving her a funny look. She unhooked her hair again. 'I, uh … I hope you don't mind. Christie's wouldn't give me your number, but I asked if they would call you to give you mine.' Helda had been right. He had been obliged to give his personal details at reception before entering the building.

'I admit I was intrigued,' he laughed. 'It is new for me, being chased down by a woman.'

'Oh, no, no,' she said hurriedly. 'It's not that.'

'It's not?' His voice was colourful and inflected with humour, as if he found everything amusing. She remembered his wink at her from the hall, the louche way he had regarded her as she came out, awaiting his turn … 'That's a shame.'

'I just wanted to thank you for handing in my bag – and the lot I had just picked up. My bad day would have become a waking nightmare if you had chosen the other option.'

He chuckled. ‘It seemed the least I could do after you helped me with my photographs. Did they tow your car?’

‘No, thank God.’

‘Huh. Pretty privilege is real, no?’

‘Oh …’ So, then, he thought she was pretty? She didn’t want to tell him how she had really stopped them. ‘Well, I find they don’t like it when you cry.’

‘I think it won’t work if I do it. But perhaps I will try.’

She grinned. ‘Um, but listen, the other thing, the reason why I wanted to get hold of you—’

‘You want to take me to dinner to say thank you?’ She heard him chuckling again. He seemed to enjoy making her flustered.

‘Actually, I did have a proposition of sorts.’

‘Good.’

‘Yes. I wondered if I could buy the box of photographs from you.’

There was a pause. ‘… What?’

‘One of the photos fell out, you see, and when I looked at it, I realized I recognized it. It was taken at my grandparents’ house. And I wondered if there might be more from here, or maybe even of them – of my grandparents, I mean; I think I saw some photos of people when I was helping you pick them up. Do you know much about the pictures?’ She was rambling, she knew.

‘No, nothing. They were found by the builders in the roof of my studio.’

‘Oh, okay.’ She deflated. There went any hope of background context to them. ‘Well, anyway, I thought if you were still interested in selling, we could cut out the middleman and I could buy them from you directly, instead of you sending them to auction?’

‘Depends. Do you have the ten thousand I was looking for, for them?’

‘Ten …?’ Her voice faded away.

He laughed. ‘I’m messing with you, Dulcie.’

Dulcie. The way he said her name in his accent gave her a shiver. She had left her name as well as her number with Christie’s, but she didn’t know his. Before she could ask him, he said, ‘I tell you what. Here is my proposition. You can have the photographs if you will have dinner with me.’

‘I …’ She winced, dropping her head into her hands and pinching her temples. Oh, God. ‘That might be difficult.’

There was a pause. ‘You are married?’

‘No.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘No, nothing like that. Listen, dinner would have been lovely, really, it’s just that I … I have a difficult personal situation at the moment. It’s hard for me to be away from home for any length of time.’

She could hear how it sounded out loud; but how was she supposed to tell him that her grandmother was dying? That she might at any moment take her last breath? Blurting out her private sorrow to the traffic policeman had felt that worst of things: indiscreet.

He sighed; it must have felt like flirting with a dishrag. ‘Okay, well, you are welcome to collect the photographs if you wish. But I must warn you, there are many ruined. Getting wet in the rain did not help them.’ His tone was flat now, all the fun gone from his voice.

‘Oh, no.’

‘It does not matter. They were never valuable anyway; I just thought they might be of interest to someone local. Like you. Maybe they are, maybe they aren’t, but you are welcome to take them.’

‘Oh. When would be good for you?’

‘Whenever. I’m always around.’

She bit her lip. ‘… This afternoon?’ She was surprised by how much she wanted to see him again. Or perhaps it was testimony to the growing claustrophobia of spending her days in a quiet, dark room.

‘Okay, sure. I’ll text you the address.’

He hung up before she could settle on a time, and she pressed disconnect, feeling foolish.

She’d got what she’d wanted, but she also hadn’t.

And she still didn’t even know his name.

It had begun sleeting by the time Dulcie walked apprehensively down the gentle sloped path, high hedges on either side of her, a window of green ahead that opened out into wild fields. She had been forced to leave the car on the main road, the lane here too narrow for vehicle access. Georges, giving directions, had told her to look out for a church, but it was little more than a chapel, she saw now, deconsecrated and abandoned; a magnificent beech tree stood watch alongside, one giant bough sweeping down almost to the ground.

She could see a crumbling drystone wall behind it, and beyond, a small outbuilding silhouetted against the silvered lake. It fit the name on the address he had texted over: l'Hermitage. Single storey, it looked like a stone hut with a stable attached. The windows and door had been painted apple green. A moss-covered water trough and a tap were set along the front, a gaggle of white geese pecking at the ground.

Dulcie stood at the gate for a moment and watched them. Did geese attack? Didn't some people use them as guards?

'Hello?' she called. Her eyes roamed the solitary building for signs of life; the windowpanes stared back at her, black and empty. Smoke was puffing from a chimney, but the door remained closed.

Hesitantly, she opened the gate, which squeaked on its hinges, and waited for a ferocious advance. A few of the geese turned their heads, and she froze as they flapped their wings.

'Hello?' she tried again.

Nothing.

She watched the geese for a few moments; they seemed largely uninterested in her, and she gingerly stepped through. She trod as lightly as she could over the dirt path, but one of the geese waddled over, approaching with intent and stretching its neck. She didn't wait to see if it was friend or foe, rushing the last few yards to get to the door. She rapped with her knuckles but when there was still no immediate reply, she tried the handle. It turned, unlocked, and she fell in.

She stood where she was. She had been expecting to find herself in a small, dark room but to her astonishment, the building extended back and was completely open plan inside, the space flooded with light from huge windows across the back that gave onto the lake. It had been converted to a studio at some point, with a kitchenette to the right and an unmade double bed pushed into the far left back corner.

He had his back to her, headphones on, as he lifted a large clay sculpture onto a wooden trolley and pushed it across the room. Even on wheels it looked immensely heavy, his muscles straining as he took it over to a random grouping of wooden pedestal tables arranged in the middle of the space and where he had set down other pieces. Against the walls were workbenches, turntables and open shelving units; ladders, loops of wire of different thicknesses, steel struts and tools hanging on hooks. Tubs and buckets were stacked on the floor, there were bags of clay and plaster, and

some chains were looped on the ground like fishing nets. A blue tarp was tethered in place above them, where the roof should have been.

Dulcie shivered as she watched him wrestle with the sculpture. He was wearing a leather apron over jeans and a jumper, but no coat. It was freezing in here, all but open to the elements, the sleet falling through narrow gaps at the edges of the tarp and the wooden floor already sodden along the wall as it melted. Oblivious to her presence, he lifted the sculpture onto the pedestal table where others were tightly grouped, but there was scarcely any space left and it stood precariously close to the edge. It was clear he was trying to keep them protected from the weather.

He put his hands on his hips, muttering something in Spanish to himself and seeming displeased.

She stepped forward. 'Hi …'

He looked round, surprised by the intrusion. Had he forgotten already? She had changed her outfit – twice – and put on mascara.

'Hey,' she smiled, growing awkward as he didn't react. 'We spoke on the phone earlier?'

He looked at her blankly.

'I'm Dulcie? I've come about the photos? … We met yesterday?'

There was another pause before he knocked his headphones off and smiled. 'I know.'

'Oh. You were messing with me.'

'You make it easy,' he shrugged, planting his hands on his hips and regarding her. 'You don't have brothers?'

'Nope. No. Only child.'

'Oh.' He gave her a pitying look. 'Well, that explains it.'

She noticed how good-looking he was even when he wasn't smiling. When he smiled, it was all she could see – white teeth, bright eyes, relaxed disposition, easy charm – but now she noticed, objectively speaking, that he had good bones, almost like a model: angular, strong.

She swallowed, wishing he didn't have this effect on her, but she suspected he had it on most women. No wonder he'd called her back with such confidence. He wasn't flirting now, though, not since she'd unequivocally knocked him back on the dinner invitation.

'You want a coffee? Or you have to get back?' he asked, pulling off his work gloves.

‘I could do a coffee,’ she said, following him over to the rustic kitchenette where a freestanding fridge stood alongside a small range. There was a dresser with plates and bowls in the racks, cups on hooks, cast-iron pans on a tiered stand, and a butcher’s block. The range appeared to be wood-fired, judging by the log basket beside it, its flue disappearing up into the chimney. Seemingly it was the only thing heating the building; there was no radiator anywhere that she could see, no open fireplace.

‘So what’s with the roof?’ she asked, looking up at the blue tarp as he reached for a jar of instant coffee. No swanky espresso machines in here.

‘There was a leak a few weeks ago. Water coming in everywhere. My landlord sent in the builders and when they inspected it, they said the rafters were rotten. Could come down at any time.’

‘Oh no!’

‘Yes. I wasn’t very pleased with the prospect of being buried alive in my sleep, so they took the roof off and gave me this instead.’ He motioned to the tarp. ‘Apparently I should be grateful.’

‘But … it’s freezing. It’s Geneva in November, not—’ She looked at him.

‘Valencia in July? I know.’

Valencia. Was that where he was from?

‘They’re working as fast as they can, but it’s not fast enough for me. Obviously.’ He gave a small shiver.

‘I’m sure I heard on the radio there’s a storm coming. Why aren’t they working here right now?’

‘Waiting on a delivery, so they say.’ He tapped the coffee into the cups.

‘Aren’t you frozen?’

‘Only when I stop,’ he said. ‘The trick is to keep moving.’

‘But at night …?’ She regretted the words as she saw a riposte cross his face, an automatic gleam come into his eyes. He swallowed it back in the next instant, clearing his throat. ‘You are English, yes? I suppose you want milk in your coffee?’

‘Thank you.’

‘I don’t have any.’

‘Oh.’

‘Sugar?’

She hesitated. ‘Do you have any?’

‘No.’ He passed her the cup with a wry look, and she tried not to wilt. She hid herself slightly behind the cup.

‘So who’s your landlord?’ she asked. ‘Because you have rights, you know. This is a hazard and a breach of contract. They should put you in alternative accommodation until it’s sorted.’

‘You’re a lawyer?’

‘Not exactly … Interior designer.’

But he shrugged, as if they were the same. ‘Unfortunately, my landlord is not commercial. This property comes as part of a grant from a private foundation … There is no other accommodation.’

‘Ah.’

‘Yes. It sucks.’

‘What’s the grant?’

‘Three years; eligible to Spanish artists. I get free tenancy here, I teach a few classes a week at the university, and in return the foundation sponsors exhibitions for me. It’s a cushy deal, though with some strings attached, of course.’

‘Such as …?’ She wrapped her fingers around the warm cup, seeing that he was doing the same. It was so cold, she realized she could see her breath.

‘Well, one of the conditions of the lease is to protect the geese.’

‘The geese?’ she spluttered.

‘There’s always got to be geese. Don’t ask me why.’ He shrugged. ‘No one knows, but it’s in the contract, so …’

‘Are they tame?’

He grinned. ‘No! They’re used to me now, but I can’t believe they let you in here unscathed. They usually make so much noise whenever anyone comes.’

‘How do you know they didn’t? You had your headphones on.’

He shrugged. ‘They’re good judges of character.’

She hesitated, sensing a veiled compliment. She turned away, her gaze lingering over the pieces set out on the workbenches as she slowly walked past. ‘So you’re a sculptor. That’s very cool.’

‘My father would disagree, but thank you.’

‘He doesn’t approve?’

‘He would have liked me to be a lawyer, or a banker like my brothers. Or even a binman, anything just so long as it is more masculine than “playing with clay”.’

‘It looked pretty masculine when you were heaving that sculpture across the room just now,’ she said over her shoulder.

His eyes narrowed, and she could see he was pleased. ‘Just how long were you standing there?’

‘Long enough. I was waiting for you to notice me.’

His mouth opened to say something – another smart comment – but he pulled himself back again, and she wished she’d just accepted his dinner invitation. Her rebuffal sat between them like a smouldering lump of coal, too hot to touch but impossible to ignore. ‘It’s usually a lot easier to move everything around when the chains are rigged up. Then they take the weight.’

‘Why aren’t the chains rigged up?’

He pointed to the timberless roof. ‘No rafters.’

‘Oh, yes,’ she mumbled, feeling foolish. ‘Of course.’

He looked over at her and she felt all thoughts leave her head. The attraction between them had its own pulse. She made herself look away quickly. ‘… So are those the photos?’ She pointed to a box left on the workbench; the white cardboard now had a tideline along the bottom.

He nodded, watching as she walked over to them. She liked the feeling of being held in his gaze. She had liked it from the very first moment yesterday.

‘It’s really kind of you to let me have them. You have to let me pay you for them.’

‘I told you, they are almost ruined. They are sticking together. There is no value there, except curiosity. What is it you’re hoping to find?’

She picked up the first few on the top. ‘I’m not even sure, to be honest. It was such a surprise seeing the picture of my grandparents’ garden. I …’ She looked over at him. She couldn’t tell him some of it without telling him all of it, and he wasn’t a policeman giving her a ticket. He was already somehow more.

She sighed. ‘My grandmother’s dying – that’s why I came over from London. She’s the only family I have left, except, she has Alzheimer’s, so she doesn’t remember my name or know who I am. Most of the time she’s asleep anyway, but when she is awake she just screams and fights because she thinks I’m trying to hurt her.’

She saw his expression change as she spoke.

‘The only things that ever seem to get through to her are old songs and old pictures. So when I saw that photo had been taken in her own house, I thought … I don’t know, I just thought it might be worth seeing if there was

anything else in there that might be familiar to her, or remind her of who she is and who I am.' She gave an embarrassed smile as he continued to stare. 'Mad, huh?'

'No. Not mad—'

A sudden gust of wind rattled the tarp loudly and he looked up, stiffening. 'Get down!'

She gasped. A crow had flown in through the gap as the blue sheet billowed upwards before sinking sharply again; it was a large bird for such a confined space, and she felt its wingbeat against her hair as it passed. He ran over and covered her with his arms as it wheeled around, sharp eyes scanning this human landscape and looking for somewhere to perch.

'Oh my God,' she whispered into his chest as it circled the space several times before finally settling on one of his metal clamps.

They stood rigid, locked together for several moments. She didn't realize she had closed her eyes.

'Stay there,' he murmured after another few moments, stretching an arm out for a dustsheet that lay folded on the countertop. She watched, holding her breath, as he let it fall open in his hand and silently approached. In the next instant he threw it like a fishing net, the sheet settling over the bird like a shroud; then he lunged, placing his hands around the ghostly shape and picking it up.

Dulcie shuddered. She couldn't bear the thought of putting her hands upon the bird's large, warm body.

'Could you open a window?' he calmly asked her.

She blinked. He had dealt with it all in a matter of moments.

'Sure,' she breathed. She ran across to the row of huge casement windows and unfastened the latch of the middle one, letting it swing as wide open as it could. She sprang back, watching as he released it, somehow throwing the bird upwards with one hand and simultaneously pulling back the sheet with the other.

'How did you do that?' she asked in amazement as it flew into the sky and he closed the window again.

'It's not the first time it's happened.'

'You've got crows flying in here on the regular?'

'I guess they're looking for refuge too,' he shrugged. 'And it was a raven. Black beak.'

'Oh.'

He looked back at her, his eyes on her hair, and she knew what he was thinking. In the moment back there, as he had dealt with the bird, there hadn't been time to process that he had thrown himself around her or that she had thrown herself into him; but now, her body felt the echoes of his touch … Comfort, protection.

Desire.

'You realize I don't know your name,' she said as the tension thickened, watching as he moved now, walking back across the room, his hands in his pockets, slowly closing the gap between them again.

'Alejandro Riveras. My friends call me Alé.'

'Right.'

Was that an invitation? Were they becoming friends? No, they both knew it wasn't that, but she wasn't sure what was happening here. She'd already drawn her line in the sand but what she said seemed to have little bearing on what her body was telling her: it was a bad time for a fling, the worst possible time. But grief could be a funny thing – contrary. Jagged – and the truth was she wanted him to hold her again, like he had just n—

A clamour rose up outside, and they both turned with a start.

'Now what?' Alejandro frowned as he went over to the door. His shoulders slumped as he looked out, cursing in Spanish.

'What is it?' Dulcie asked. 'Another bird taking aim?' She walked over to where he stood.

'Uh, look, I wasn't expecting anyone …' he said in a low voice. 'She's a client …'

She?

Dulcie looked out and saw a woman in a fur coat standing by the gate, the geese honking furiously at her as she waved her arms at them to get away. 'Alé!' she called. 'Can you get these things under control?'

Dulcie caught her breath. *My friends call me Alé*. Client, huh? There was familiarity in the woman's tone. No, more than that – intimacy.

She hadn't been so much saved by the bell as by the geese. She gave a wry smile as she stepped back and crossed the room, grateful that reality had intruded on her daydreams before she could act on them. She had been on the very cusp of making a huge mistake. 'I should be going anyway,' she said, lifting the box of photographs.

'No, you don't have to,' he said quickly. 'I can—'

'Alé, call them!' the woman cried, clutching her fur coat tighter.

‘Thanks for these. I really appreciate it,’ Dulcie said, stepping past him and going outside without meeting his eyes again.

She didn’t care whether the flock would charge her as she came out into the open. Death by a thousand pecks? So be it. She just needed to make her escape … But to her amazement, the geese stopped their quarrel with the woman, dispersing from the gate as she approached. The woman looked as surprised by the birds’ change in behaviour as she was to see Dulcie emerging from the building.

‘Hi,’ Dulcie said breezily, passing her at the gate with an innocuous smile.

‘… Hi.’ The woman looked curiously at her, then at the box in her arms, then at Alejandro still standing by the door. Dulcie kept walking, offering no explanation; it wasn’t like it was hers to give. She heard the gate click behind her and then the geese started up their rabble again, followed by a shriek. She would have liked to see the comical scene for herself, but there was no point in turning back when there was no going forwards.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Paris
16 August 1962

‘Ah, *chérie*, you are back.’ Valentin looked up as he placed a small box of cufflinks into his suitcase on the bed. ‘I’m so glad.’

‘What’s going on?’ Lise asked, stopping in the doorway to his bedroom. It was decorated in cool blue silk, almost grey, with mahogany trim; it felt like a hotel room. He didn’t have any of the personal artefacts here that she had in her room across the hall: no photographs, scent, accessories. Anything that belonged to him was neatly hidden behind wardrobe doors and drawers. Much like the man himself, nothing personal was on display.

She leaned against the jamb, still feeling a little woozy from the martinis and wine, an Yves Saint Laurent shopping bag dangling from her wrist. She hadn’t felt like coming straight back after the lunch, needing to calm her unsettled nerves first. Now, as she saw him preparing to leave, she wished she’d raced back.

‘Are we going somewhere?’

‘I am. Something’s come up, I’m afraid,’ he said, giving her that apologetic smile that softened his eyes. ‘But it should only be for a night, two at most.’

She frowned. ‘But where are you going? Can’t I come with you?’

He held his arms out and she walked into them. ‘If only,’ he groaned, pressing his face into her hair. ‘But it’s not possible on this occasion. Next time, I’m sure, it’ll be less sensitive.’

‘You can’t even tell me where you’re going?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ He looked away, reaching for the book on his bedside table – a biography of Napoleon. ‘I’m really hoping I’ll be back here by

tomorrow night. We've got that dinner at the Élysée Palace, of course.'

Of course.

'But in case I can't, Otto is ready to step into my shoes. He'll look after you. I don't want you to worry about it at all.'

'You want me to go to dinner with the president without you?' She was aghast at the suggestion. Otto Girard was his deputy and shadow, a true bureaucrat who didn't just follow the rules but embodied them. There was a real risk he would bore her to death.

'Don't worry, *chérie*, Otto won't leave your side; and there'll be so many people there, you need only talk to them for a few minutes at most. The main thing to remember is that the First Lady is a conservative Catholic, and as such has strong views on things such as …' His eyes fell to her shortened dress. 'Skirt lengths.'

'Skirt lengths?'

'Madame de Gaulle is not in favour of the miniskirt,' he murmured, his tone neutral, although from the slight hitch of his eyebrows, she discerned his private disagreement on the matter. 'In fact, I believe she is trying to persuade her husband to have them outlawed.'

Lise stared at him as he rolled up a tie, hardly able to believe she was going to have to navigate this without him. She was also suddenly very aware of her own expanse of bare thigh, now apparently a token of moral wickedness.

'And do you think that's a good idea?' she asked, her fingers reaching for the hem of her blue dress and gathering it up, up, up her legs until she knew he could see her silk knickers. 'Do you think this should be illegal?'

Valentin caught his breath, the rolled-up tie falling from his hand. 'Lise, as much as I would love to, this isn't the—'

She dropped her bag and walked over to where he was standing, jumping up and forcing him to catch her as she wrapped her legs around his waist. She kissed him passionately, desperate for his comfort after an unsettling afternoon. She wanted to feel close to him, as she always used to. They were a team, the two of them against the world. She had hated what she'd heard the women saying at lunch today – joking or not – and she didn't ever want to be like them.

'It's never the time. We have to make it time.' She felt his hands grip her more tightly, his fingertips pressing into her thighs as she kissed his face, his ear, knowing he liked that.

‘Lise …’

‘Fuck me,’ she whispered, knowing he was struggling to hold back. She knew what his point of capitulation looked like. Many times before their marriage he’d stood above her as she lay in bedsheets and he buttoned up his shirt, leaving for the next meeting, only for her to entice him back for a few minutes more. For all his studied blandness in public, in private he was a man of appetite. It was that very juxtaposition that she so enjoyed.

‘I—’ A voice suddenly intruded. ‘Oh. I apologize. I’ll come back.’

Sylvie spun on her heel to go, but Valentin swiftly prised himself from his wife’s embrace, setting her down with a quick look of anger. ‘No, it’s fine. What is it, Sylvie?’

‘The car’s here, sir.’

‘Thank you. I’ll be right down.’

The assistant disappeared, leaving the two of them standing staring at the ground, together but apart. For a moment, neither of them spoke, but Lise could feel his mortification as well as her own.

‘Happy now?’ he snapped, reaching for the lid of the case and pushing it shut. ‘Is that what you wanted? An audience? She’s our assistant.’

‘We’re in our bedroom! Where’s our privacy?’

‘The door was open.’

‘So? Even if it had been closed, she would have come in. Or stood there behind it. I don’t even know which is worse!’

He slipped his feet into his shoes as he glanced over at her. ‘Have you been drinking, Lise?’

‘What?’

‘I could taste wine.’

‘… I had lunch with Eva de Guise today, I told you that. She introduced me to her friends.’

He shot her a troubled look of disapproval. ‘Well, you should take it easy. Never more than one glass, especially with those women. I rely on your discretion. It’s vital, in fact.’

‘Valentin, I haven’t uttered a single word I shouldn’t have. I’m not drunk.’

‘But you’re not fully yourself either,’ he said, walking over to the chair and slipping on his jacket. She watched him as he pulled down his cuffs and fiddled with his collar and tie.

‘No, because I’m lonely!’ she cried as he crossed back over to the bed and picked up the small suitcase.

‘Lise, this isn’t the time—’

‘It never is! Do you know you haven’t touched me once since we got here? Every night we have dinner with thirty people, every night we stand on opposite sides of the ballroom – but you haven’t once come into my bed.’

He sighed, knowing she wasn’t wrong. ‘I’m sorry,’ he relented. ‘You’re right. Things have been crazy lately. There’s so much going on behind the scenes. But it’s not my choice. You have to know I don’t like it any more than you do?’

‘Do I? You don’t look bothered in the least.’ Her eyes were wide, watching, waiting for him to walk out of the room and leave her there. They had no time even to fight, much less make love.

‘Of course I am, but it’s just the way things are right now. I’m being pulled in ten different directions.’

He sighed again, seeing her distress as she trembled, her body rigid with frustration and despair. He put the case down again and cupped her face in his hands. ‘Look, forgive me. It’s been a bad run, very poorly timed. I promise, when I get back, I’ll get Sylvie to clear an evening in my diary and we’ll have dinner, some proper time together, just you and me.’

She hated that it sounded like such an effort to arrange. A simple evening with his wife having to be marked in the diary, engagements cancelled. ‘You always say that.’

He bent down and kissed her. ‘But this time I’m promising. In fact, it is an iron-clad guarantee. I love you, *chérie*.’

‘I love you,’ she whispered, reassured.

‘I have to go. The car’s outside. But I’ll call you later, when I get there, okay?’

There. She still had no idea where that was.

He smiled at her, shrugging off the argument like an old scarf. ‘And remember to wear something long tomorrow.’

‘But you’ll be back, you think?’

‘I hope so. But just in case, keep off the topics of nudity in films, and pornography – your go-to cocktail-party talk, I know,’ he quipped. ‘Oh, and she hates Brigitte Bardot.’

‘Bardot?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘I’ll tell you another time.’

‘So you’re saying to just dress like a nun and talk like a nun?’

‘Now you’ve got it,’ he grinned.

She watched him go, wishing that she could laugh it all off too; but it wasn’t illegal miniskirts that felt like the joke.

‘You look different this evening, Madame Erlach.’

Lise recognized the wry voice before she even turned her head. That cut-glass accent was recognizable anywhere.

‘I was told to exercise moral jurisprudence in my attire,’ she said in a low voice as Tatton Wagstaff leaned in and kissed her lightly on each cheek.

He nodded appreciatively at her long gown – chestnut satin with a boat neck, bracelet sleeves and a black bow at her waist. She was decked in emeralds tonight and her hair had been styled up in a chignon, everything about her sleek and chic. ‘Well, then, mission accomplished.’

‘You look very smart too,’ she said, taking in his white-tie ensemble.

‘This old thing?’

She grinned, feeling better now that she had found a friendly face. Valentin in fact hadn’t made it back for the event; so, as promised, Otto had stuck by her side all evening, both in the receiving line and throughout the cocktail reception, introducing her to all the people in their briefing portfolios. She half wondered whether he was expecting her to report back to Valentin, praising his diligence in keeping to the Swiss party line. He hadn’t put a foot wrong, always saying exactly the right thing at the right moment to the right person, and she found herself watching him with detachment, seeing how smoothly he manipulated each interaction so that everyone left feeling both seen and heard. And yet there was nothing of himself in any conversation. No personal opinions, no insights into the man. He was simply a mirror, parroting policy and government agendas. Lise found his obedience – his perfection – stultifying, and yet she knew Valentin must possess these same skills. It was the art of the diplomat to be not just a gentleman, but an everyman.

‘Where’s your protector gone?’ he asked her.

‘Bathroom break.’

‘Interesting. I didn’t know robots had calls of nature.’

Lise kept her amusement contained. ‘Is that why you’ve only come over now? Because he’s gone?’

‘Well, old Otto’s not known for his sparkling repartee, but I could never let a lady stand deserted on the battlefield.’

She looked out across the parquet floor. ‘Is this a battlefield?’

‘You’d better believe it. Deadliest I know.’

‘Kind of you, then, to save me.’

‘Always. We democratic denizens have to stick together,’ he said, speaking in an exaggerated, comical manner out of the corner of his mouth. He gazed out over the sea of dignitaries. ‘So, Valentin is …?’

‘Away on business.’

‘Must be important if he’s missing this.’

‘It always seems to be.’

He glanced at her, and she wondered if he’d picked up on some of her frustration. She remembered her husband’s words to her in the bedroom yesterday evening, his need for her utmost discretion. ‘Are you married, Mr Wagstaff?’ she asked lightly.

‘You really must call me Wags. All my very best friends do.’

She smiled, flattered by the implied compliment.

‘And no; I’m afraid the love of a good woman never found me.’

Lise watched him, detecting an overt brightness to the words – obscuring another truth? It was like sunlight flashing on a sword, masking its sharp edge. She had spent a lot of time in the company of diplomats recently and felt she was beginning to learn something of their ways. The arts of doublespeak, charm, verbal sleight of hand …

Well, if he did play for the other team, it only made her like him more. She could relax, knowing he wasn’t trying to seduce her.

‘Ah, Wagstaff – Madame Erlach.’ A man wearing a red sash pinned with a Russian medal stopped in front of them with a click of his ankles. ‘A pleasure to see you here.’

Lise stared at him, feeling her mind go blank as he mimed kissing her hand. She knew she knew his face, but for several paralysing seconds she could not recall his name. Where was Otto?

‘Markov,’ Wagstaff said, vigorously pumping his hand and jogging her memory – this was Sergei Markov, Russian military attaché. Last time they’d met, he’d been in full uniform, along with three of his comrades.

‘General Markov,’ she smiled. ‘How lovely to see you again.’

‘You were talking with the president for quite some time,’ Wagstaff said in a pointed tone.

‘Watching, were you?’ Markov replied, but he looked pleased. Everything about him was heavy – his accent, his tread, his cologne, even his cigarettes, which were black Sobranies. He drew them out from his pocket and politely offered. They politely declined.

‘It’s a fascinating love affair; one few could have foreseen,’ Wagstaff needled.

Markov smirked. ‘It was perhaps not such a surprise to us as to you. You British are so desperate to stitch yourselves to the Americans, but de Gaulle is a shrewd man. He sees the threat China poses down the line.’

‘You mean, the threat of China rivalling you for leadership of the communist bloc?’ Wagstaff delivered every comment with a jocular tone, like a little brother ribbing his older sibling, but Lise detected the rapier slice in his words.

Markov, however, would not be baited. He smiled. ‘We are beginning to share his optimism in détente.’

Wagstaff laughed loudly. ‘Détente?’ he scoffed. ‘Has anyone told Khrushchev?’

Lise stood by mutely, out of her depth and unable to contribute even platitudes. Her mind raced through her prepared notes: Nikita Khrushchev, the Russian premier, had succeeded Stalin. He was bombastic, fiery and emotional. Even she found the suggestion of him following a policy of détente – or de-escalation – against western nations to be unlikely.

‘You Brits are still so stuck in the lines drawn after the war,’ Markov drawled. ‘That was almost twenty years ago, Wagstaff. Time to move on. De Gaulle sees we do not have to be enemies because we follow different political ideologies, just like he does not automatically have to be your friend because of NATO.’

‘So we’re all friends now? And to think I thought only my enemy’s enemies were my friends.’

There was a pause, then Markov smiled. ‘De Gaulle, like us, believes in a multipolar world which is not necessarily dominated by Washington. You might tell your friends in Whitehall to consider that too. America isn’t the dear friend to Britain you believe it to be. It is more of a one-way street now, I think?’

Lise could see Markov’s words had hit their target as Wagstaff drew himself a little taller, offering a rare glimpse of real feeling. It was no secret that the famously friendly British and American relationship had come

unstuck in the wake of the recent Suez crisis, but with Kennedy replacing Eisenhower in the Oval Office, Harold Macmillan had been making strides in closing the gap that had opened up.

'Ah, gentlemen,' Otto said, returning at last. He looked momentarily stricken to find Lise flanked by a Russian general and a British diplomat. 'Have I missed much?'

'Not at all. We're discussing the French–Soviet love-in and what pretty bedfellows they make,' Wagstaff quipped.

'Indeed.' Otto looked uneasy.

'It's a powerful image, I grant you – de Gaulle and Khrushchev in their pyjamas together—'

'You will excuse me,' Markov said coldly, stalking off before Wagstaff could finish the insult wrapped up in a joke.

Wagstaff shrugged, but Lise saw the way his eyes followed the Russian across the room. No love was lost on either side. The Englishman was simply better at cloaking his contempt.

'Pity Valentin couldn't make it,' Wagstaff said mildly, pulling his attention back to them.

'Yes,' Otto agreed. 'Busy times.'

Wagstaff raised his glass to his lips. 'How's he getting on with Donovan and the dratted Bay of Pigs negotiations?'

'… They are ongoing.'

'Hmm.'

Otto had hesitated only fractionally, but Lise had heard it – Wagstaff too – and she suddenly understood that her husband was in Cuba with the lawyer.

And if he was in Cuba, then he would have known for certain there could be no chance of making it back here for tonight; nor even tomorrow, probably. His promise to 'do his best' had been empty, and for the first time, she realized that he managed her as much as he did anyone. A silver tongue and a cool head might make for an excellent ambassador, but they were not necessarily such good qualities in a husband. Because it didn't feel like love, being told what she wanted to hear and having her expectations massaged.

It felt like manipulation.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

Lake Geneva
29 November 2026

There's an irony in waiting for death. Life can stop long before the heart. Dulcie hadn't left the house in three days, and she felt as if she were the ghost, haunting the halls, a pale reflection in the mirrors. Even kitchen-table suppers with Helda and Georges were quiet, no one with any conversation to offer besides the worsening weather.

The days were both too long and too short as she sat by the bed, watching the sun rise and set in a narrow channel of hours. She was halfway through reading *Doctor Zhivago* and she wasn't hopeful of a happy ending. She had started listening to the radio in the background while she tested her wits with solitaire on the card table, but even that felt too … playful. She felt guilty looking for distraction, feeling that she ought to be sitting monk-like, in silence and mournful anticipation, as they awaited the dreadful hour.

The nurse was the only one kept busy, pressing a damp sponge to her patient's mouth to moisten her lips, feeding her juice on a teaspoon, moving her every couple of hours to prevent bedsores. Her grandmother was sleeping more and more, which in turn meant she was scarcely eating. Anna had told Dulcie this stage of active dying was about comfort, not nutrition now, but it was difficult watching her grandmother actually shrink before them. She was diminishing, retreating, sinking from the living world, and they could only look on, holding her hand …

'Dulcie.'

She started. Helda's hand was on her shoulder, her voice low.

'Wha—?' She looked around her in fright, checked her grandmother was still breathing in bed. '… Did I drop off?'

Helda nodded.

Dulcie frowned. She too was becoming a creature of the twilight, it appeared. Dim lights and a crackling fire were enough to make anyone drowsy.

‘That man’s here. From the other day.’

‘He is?’ Dulcie felt her heart skip a beat. Alejandro had become her ghost, tiptoeing through the corridors of her mind, emerging from dark corners of boredom and restlessness. Their parting at the studio had been abrupt; silent accusation in the way she had turned her back. She had run as if she’d been scalded, when really he had done nothing wrong. He had seemed surprised – no, more than that, agitated – by the unexpected visitor, but even if that woman was more than just a client, it was none of Dulcie’s business. She had allowed her own feelings to get ahead of the actual situation between them. Attraction didn’t equal obligation, or ownership. He owed her nothing.

‘He’s in the drawing room.’

‘Right. Yes, I’ll be right down.’ She smoothed her hair with her hands. She should put on some make-up, but if he was waiting for her …

She looked over at Anna, sitting by her desk in the corner, surrounded by medical charts and pill bottles. She was reading a book, but she gave Dulcie the nod to go; nothing was imminent.

She ran to her bedroom and put on some mascara and lip gloss, threw a brush through her hair quickly and swapped her warm grey cardigan for a fitted berry-coloured jumper. It wasn’t quite what the magazines would call a ‘day to night’ transition, but she definitely looked more put-together and she could feel her pulse quickening as she strode down the hall towards the stairs, like a green shoot reaching for the sunlight, desperately growing itself away from the cold, hard earth.

How had he got her address? she wondered as her hand slipped over the smooth oak handrail, her footsteps light upon the stair treads. Had Christie’s returned the favour to him in giving him her details? Had he been thinking of her the way she had of him?

She crossed the reception hall towards the drawing room, where the door was ajar, gathering herself with a deep breath as she walked in—

The man turned, slowly. Stooped. Wizened.

He was standing by the fireplace in a black wool overcoat and trilby hat. It was still chilly in here. Helda always kept the hearths set and ready to

light for just such moments as these, when surprises were sprung and rooms that had been out of use for weeks were required with no notice; but it would take some time before any real heat was thrown out.

‘Hello,’ the man said, lifting his hat gallantly.

British accent.

‘Hello,’ she replied, feeling her hopes collapse. Distantly she remembered the surprise visit the other night, when Georges had answered the door thinking it was Max. The man had called asking after her grandmother. She had forgotten all about it.

‘Dulcie Beaumont,’ she said, walking over, her hand outstretched.

‘Tatton Wagstaff,’ he replied. ‘I apologize for turning up unannounced yet again. I cannot seem to make my portable phone work here, and nobody seems to have landlines these days.’

‘Oh.’ She was at a loss. ‘No, no, it’s quite all right. Won’t you take a seat?’ He didn’t look as if he could stand for any length of time. She motioned to the yellow sofa, covered with tapestried cushions, to his right. He was very tall even with his stoop; his body was thin. At a guess, she’d have said he was in his nineties.

‘Thank you,’ he nodded, lowering himself slowly.

Dulcie sat down opposite, waiting. ‘Helda will be in with some tea in a moment. Are you warm enough? I’m afraid it’s cool in here. We haven’t used this room much lately.’

‘The cold’s never bothered me,’ he replied, casting his gaze approvingly around the room. ‘What a beautiful home you have here.’

‘Thank you,’ she nodded, looking around the room with an objective gaze. It had been decorated years ago in butter yellow with peach and green accents, a trefoil ottoman between the chairs, a gilded mirror above the mantelpiece and the back wall dominated by a magnificent full-size portrait of her grandmother. ‘It’s been in my grandmother’s family for generations.’

‘Actually, I visited here once, many years ago.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes. And I’m no expert on these things, but the house feels very much the same as it did then. Although the artworks … I feel I would have remembered that portrait.’

His gaze fell to the life-size oil on the wall behind her, and Dulcie smiled as she turned to glance back at it. ‘It is quite bold.’ It had been commissioned for her grandmother’s thirtieth birthday. She was wearing an

ivory silk crêpe dress with balloon sleeves and a plunging V, a twisted gold rope belt at her waist, her light brown hair swept up in a loose chignon and a dazzling peacock-blue-and-mustard topaz choker at her throat.

'As was she. No one could mix colours and styles like Lise. She led the way in Paris while she was there. The other women were wretched with envy,' he smiled. 'She loved interesting jewellery especially. I remember one time she wore an antique tribal African collar when everyone else was in pearls.' He chuckled. 'I hope she kept it all for you?'

Dulcie turned back to him. 'Yes, much of it anyway, although it's been years since I've raided her jewellery boxes. I used to love dressing up in her things when I was little and we'd come over here for our holidays. But, then —' She stopped herself. There was no need to spill her entire family history to him. 'Well, you grow up, don't you?'

'Some of us, I'm told,' he smiled. He looked at her with inquisitive eyes, and behind the aged visage she sensed shrewdness. Keen perception. 'I see the resemblance between you. You've got her smile. She was a very beautiful woman too. All of us were a little bit in love with her back in the day.'

'So you knew her well?'

'We became very great friends in the time our lives overlapped. It was a particular intersection, when we were both in Paris in the early sixties.'

'When my grandfather was the Swiss ambassador there?'

He hesitated. 'Indeed. I was at the British embassy, though I never quite reached the lofty heights of ambassador. Few do, of course … Valentin was always the exception to the rule.'

Dulcie shrugged. 'I've heard wonderful things, but sadly I never met him.'

'A shame. He was a remarkable man. His death was a tragedy that marked us all. He died far too young. He still had so much to give.'

'Granny said he died in an accident.'

'Hmm; an accident, yes,' Wagstaff nodded. He looked down at his hands. 'Your poor grandmother was devastated, of course. She came back here to live, remarried, and I'm sorry to say we rather lost touch after that. Our lives were moving in different directions. I've never been the best at staying in contact, although I thought of her often and always held her dear …' He trailed off, seeming to sink into memories for a moment before looking back at her interestedly. 'But your accent … You're British, not Swiss?'

‘That’s right. My father was British, so I was born in London and grew up there. I live there now too but …’ She hesitated. There was no point in hiding the truth from him either; he was clearly determined to see her grandmother. ‘Well, I’ve come back because – and I’m sorry to have to tell you this, especially when you’ve come out of your way – but my grandmother is in the end stages of Alzheimer’s.’

He blinked, visibly surprised. ‘Alzheimer’s?’

‘We expect her to pass any day now.’

‘I see.’ He looked away, staring up at the likeness in oils of the woman he had once known. ‘I had heard her health was failing, but … Alzheimer’s. That is a tragedy,’ he said quietly. ‘To be lost to herself. She always had such a lively mind. Very nimble wit, I recall.’

‘Yes.’ Dulcie was wringing her hands in her lap. Already her grandmother was being discussed in the past tense.

He looked at her. ‘May I see her?’

‘Oh, I’m afraid she’s sleeping. She’s always sleeping these days …’ But she caught his dismayed expression and relented a little. ‘Besides, she’s not at all who she used to be. It would be a horrible shock for you.’

‘Even so.’ His hand clawed slightly as he gripped the arm of the chair. ‘I hate to push or be in any way an inconvenience, but if I could just see her one last time. Say goodbye. I’ve come a long way, and …’

Dulcie hesitated. He didn’t look much stronger than the frail old lady in the bed. ‘Well, I don’t suppose there’s any harm, so long as you understand we can’t wake her. She’s very, very weak.’

He nodded respectfully. ‘Understood.’

Helda was coming in with the tray of tea as they stepped out. ‘Thank you, Helda. We’ll be right back. Mr Wagstaff is just coming up with me to pay his last respects to Granny.’

‘Of course,’ Helda nodded, clearly wondering – like Dulcie – how long it would take for the aged gentleman to climb the winding staircase.

Eight minutes later, they were standing outside the bedroom door. Dulcie knocked lightly, and Anna looked up as they walked in.

‘This is Mr Wagstaff, an old friend of Granny’s from Paris,’ she explained. ‘Anna is Granny’s nurse.’

‘A pleasure,’ Wagstaff said, his polite expression changing as he took in the sight of the tiny figure tucked under the covers. She looked like a

porcelain doll, pale and fragile, her skin so paper-thin that the veins and blood vessels could be easily seen. ‘Oh, dear Lise.’

He walked over and looked down at her, clasping her hand lightly in his own, but there was, of course, no response.

‘I’m afraid she’s like this most of the time now. She’s scarcely ever awake. If she’s lucky, she’ll just slip away in her sleep,’ Dulcie murmured as she stood beside him.

He was quiet for a long time, looking down at her. ‘She’s beautiful still. Even now.’

‘Yes.’

‘Good bones. And a good heart, your grandmother. She was a warrior in that regard.’ He smiled. ‘First time I met her, she looked like Cleopatra. Except even more beautiful than Elizabeth Taylor.’

‘Really?’

‘Mm. Paris society had never seen the like, and certainly not the diplomatic service.’ He smiled at the memory. ‘She even had the Soviets in a spin.’

But his smile faded, a shadow passing over his face, as the moments ticked past and the figure in the bed didn’t stir. She scarcely appeared to be breathing.

He turned to her slightly. ‘Miss Beaumont, I must beg a favour, if I may.’

She looked at him, seeing an intensity in his expression. ‘Of course.’

‘I must stay here. Until she wakes up.’

‘I’m afraid she may be asleep for hours now. When did she last wake, Anna?’

‘Around eleven.’

Dulcie nodded as if that settled it. ‘It’s more that she is unconscious, rather than asleep, you see. She’s so fatigued, her body’s failing. It could be hours, or even days, before she stirs again.’

‘That’s what I mean. I must ask to stay here until that happens. If I come back again on the off chance tomorrow, or the day after, I’ll probably never come at the right moment. And it is imperative I talk to her. There’s something she must know.’

‘Well, I can pass on a message for you—’

‘No, no, you don’t understand.’ She saw the agitation in his body although he held himself well. ‘She can only hear it from me.’

Dulcie shifted awkwardly. ‘Mr Wagstaff, it’s not that I don’t appreciate you coming to pay your respects to my grandmother. Really, I do. But … this is a private time, for family. I’m sure you understand. It wouldn’t be appropriate to have guests while we’re keeping vigil.’

He looked pained, holding his counsel for several moments, as if he was trying and discarding lines of argument. ‘Please let me assure you, the very last thing I would ever want to do is intrude at such a time as this. And if I thought your grandmother could go to the grave without knowing this, then I would leave here and not turn back.’

She blinked at him, hearing the gravity in his voice.

‘But I do believe it is vitally important that she hears what I’ve come to tell her, especially now, before she dies. She needs to know the truth.’

‘Truth?’ Dulcie frowned. ‘About what?’

He sighed, looking somehow even older. ‘About Valentin’s death – and everything that came afterwards.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

Paris
22 August 1962

The knock on the door was light but only a few seconds were given, waiting for a response, before the bedroom door was opened and a cone of light fell across the floor and onto the corner of the bed. Valentin stirred, sweeping his leg off her hip and turning over under the sheet but Lise instinctively followed him, pressing herself to his back.

A throat was cleared. ‘Apologies, sir.’ The man’s voice was low, but Lise recognized Otto’s officious tone.

‘No,’ she sighed, her breath warm on her husband’s back as she felt his muscles stiffen, sleep receding.

‘There’s been an incident.’

‘… Incident?’ Valentin’s voice was croaky as he slowly pulled himself up onto one elbow with a groan.

‘An assassination attempt on the president.’

In a flash, he was wide awake. Lise too. The word ‘assassination’ was hard to sleep through. ‘Where?’

‘Clamart. Reports suggest he and the First Lady are unharmed, but it was very close.’

‘Do they know who?’

‘Paramilitary, they think.’

Valentin nodded. ‘Okay, okay. Give me a minute. I’ll be right there.’

The door closed again and darkness embraced them, but she knew that was his night done. She turned over and looked at the fluorescent hands of her bedside clock. One forty-four.

They had only gone to bed at eleven. He had made up for being away almost a week on his clandestine trip by making good on his promise to prioritize her on his return. He had arranged for dinner to be sent to their private quarters, where they had eaten and drunk Dom Perignon and he had seduced her, for the first time in weeks, on the sofa, before they had moved in here.

She sat up and rubbed her hands down her face, watching as he swung his legs out and planted his feet on the carpet. He looked exhausted, his head hanging. How was this pace sustainable?

'Can't Otto handle it for you?' she asked. 'At least until it's a civilized hour.'

He shook his head

'But if de Gaulle is unharmed—'

'Doesn't matter. That man has more lives than ten cats. This is … the thirtieth attempt, I think?' His voice was low and addled with sleep.

'Right, so, then, what's another?'

The quip fell flat as he glanced at her over his shoulder, getting up and walking across the room in search of his clothes. She admired his naked physique as he put on his boxers. He might be fourteen years her senior but he looked better than most men her age. He looked after himself well, running most days, never overindulging at the many rich dinners in which he had to partake and always declining dessert. 'Where are my trousers?' His voice was flat, irritable.

'By the chair,' she suggested, watching as he searched in the darkness. 'But why does it need you to be there? Why can't Otto go?' she pressed.

'Above his pay grade.' His hands found the trousers, crumpled, one leg inside out. She watched as he pulled it back out and stepped into them. He buttoned up the fly, his eyes scanning the floor.

'Where's my damned shirt?'

Lise flinched at his tone, but the first buzz of a headache was beginning to trouble her too, and she put a hand to her head.

Valentin looked immediately regretful. 'Are you okay?'

'Fine. I think I drank too much champagne,' she groaned.

There was a pause, the memories of just a few hours ago intruding into this twilight scene. '*Chérie*, I'm sorry. You know I didn't want it to be like this tonight.'

‘It’s fine.’ She felt defeated. She couldn’t compete with an assassination attempt for her husband’s undivided attention.

‘You know, you look very tempting like that,’ he said, seeing how the sheet had fallen away, exposing her. He walked to the bed and leaned over, kissing her.

‘For all the good it does me,’ she mumbled as he ran a warm hand over her breasts. ‘You’re still leaving.’

‘Go back to sleep,’ he murmured. ‘There’s no need for both of us to be awake.’

‘I worry about you, Valentin,’ she whispered as he pushed her gently back into the pillows.

‘That’s sweet,’ he smiled. ‘But I’m fine. This is what I signed up to.’

And her too? If she had understood the extent of his obligations to his job, would she have been so quick to say yes to his marriage proposal?

She watched him cross the room and leave, bare-chested but slightly more presentable than a few moments earlier. He closed the door behind him and darkness fell upon her like a heavy coat. She blinked a few times, feeling alone in the huge bed as she heard the sounds of busyness and importance coming from his room as he found a fresh shirt, Otto’s voice carrying as Valentin was debriefed, their footsteps sounding dully on the carpets as they finally moved off.

Her arm swept over the silky sheet; it was still warm from where he’d been lying and she rolled over, pressing her cheek to the mattress and smelling his scent. He’d only just gone but she missed him already. She had had him for all of half a night, and she wondered if it was almost worse to have him for a little while than not at all.

A wave of loneliness crashed over her. Would it always be like this? Knocks on their bedroom door in the middle of the night, parting them even in their sleep?

She got up to use the bathroom, her eyes falling, on her return, to the sofa where her dress lay unzipped on one arm. Valentin’s missing shirt was crumpled on the floor beside it. The empty bottle of champagne was upside down in the bucket, the ice long since melted, two glasses on the table. The scene told a story without words, one the housekeeper would read easily when she clocked in for her shift in the morning. Lise walked over to clear their clothes away at least, pressing her face to the shirt as she moved back into the bedroom. She shrugged it on; she had taken to sleeping in his shirts

before they were married. He loved the look of her swamped in them and they always smelled so strongly of him, becoming a sort of comforter for her in those distant hotel rooms as she awaited his return.

Her hands went to the collar, smoothing it down, but her fingers tracked against something waxy on the inside. She switched on the bedside light and stared at the small smear of lipstick. She wore it all the time, of course, but hers was pink and this was red.

Telling another story, without words.

She ran up the stairs, not bothering this time to wait for the lift's geriatric progress through the floors. She passed the shiny bike and the pristine welly boots, droplets of water still sprinkled on the leaves of the pelargonium in its pot.

Eva opened the door, still wearing her morning robe, her hair set in rollers. 'Lise!' she said, looking shocked as she took in her friend's evident distress. 'What's happened?'

'Is Pierre here?' Lise gasped, looking past her into the immaculate reception hall.

'No. He left two hours ago. What's wrong? Is it Valentin?'

'He's having an affair!' The words burst from Lise, unstoppable. The unsayable, said.

Eva blinked back at her. '… What?'

'Can I come in?'

'S-sure.' Eva stepped back as Lise almost fell into the space. She was panting hard, having half jogged, half sprinted over here with no idea of where she was going. Sleep had been impossible after her discovery and she had rocked herself in the empty bed for hours, trying to come up with another convincing explanation. But there wasn't one, and at the first crack of sunlight she had thrown on her jeans and a shirt and slipped from the residence, unnoticed. News of the latest attempt on the president's life had put the entire city in a spin. No one cared about a betrayed wife.

Eva put a hand on her shoulder, seeing how she was shaking. 'Come. Let's have a coffee and get you calmed down.'

Lise followed her through the apartment, past the contemporary reception room into a surprisingly bourgeois kitchen. It was small, with dark green units and a black-and-white-tiled floor, a round café table and chairs by the window. Eva passed her a cigarette while she made coffee, throwing Lise

worried looks as she stood at the window and stared out into the courtyard at the back.

'Tell me what happened.'

'I found lipstick on his collar last night. And no – before you say it – it wasn't mine. I never wear red.'

Eva took a deep intake of breath, nodding at the irrefutable facts of the matter. 'So, then, what did he say?'

'He doesn't know I know. He had to leave in the night. This business with de Gaulle.'

'Yes, yes, of course; it's everywhere.' Eva set down the coffee on the small table and they sat, Lise rubbing a knot of wood with her thumb.

She looked back at her friend, un-made-up and pale. It had been a long time since she had seen her *au naturel* and it made her look younger. 'We've been married a month, Eva. One month!'

'I …' Eva looked at a loss for words. But what could she say to make any of this better? 'Yes. That is fast.'

'Fast?' Lise gave a shocked laugh, but it didn't reach her eyes. 'I never thought he would do this to me, ever. Much less …' She stared at the wooden knot again. 'I really thought he loved me.'

'He did! He does.'

'I'm still his bride,' she whispered. 'Do you know how many nights we've spent together since we arrived in Paris?'

Eva shook her head.

'One. Last night. Except not even that. It was half. He was called away —'

'Lise, he has a big job.'

'I know. And it's one thing to share him with that. But another woman? Or women? I have no idea how many there are!'

'Valentin wouldn't—'

'How do you know?' Lise's eyes were wide. 'If he's done it once, why not twenty other times? What if every night he didn't come to my bed, it was because he'd been with someone else?'

She'd been over and over it in her mind as she walked, questioning every reason, every excuse given. Even that narrow gap in his diary, late afternoon most days – between finishing his paperwork or meetings and the start of the evening functions – when he would go running, was now under suspicion. Wasn't it, by definition, *cinq à sept*? The window for lovers to

meet? She had thought it was far too obvious; that he was too elegant for such a bourgeois arrangement. Now she knew nothing at all.

Eva's mouth was open, but no words were forthcoming. She clearly didn't know what to say. '… I know he loves you,' she said weakly.

Lise looked away, feeling somehow worse as Eva failed to make a convincing case for the legitimacy of her marriage. They were silent for several moments, smoking, lost in thought.

'When we had lunch here, you know I actually felt pity for those women?' Lise said bitterly, flicking ash into the saucer Eva had set down as an ashtray. 'I thought how sad it was that they were all so flippant about their affairs, as if they were competing with their husbands for who could care less. And I thought to myself that Valentin and I would never be like that, no matter how many years passed, because we're obsessed with each other. We're in love! I thought we would stay in the honeymoon stage for always.'

'You still can!'

Lise looked at her friend in disbelief. 'How? Have you heard a single word I've said?'

'Just turn the other cheek. Don't look. It isn't personal, Lise—'

'Isn't personal?' She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Wasn't this as personal as it got?

'All men do this. Pierre. And yes, Valentin.' Eva shrugged, sitting back in her chair with a sympathetic look.

Lise remembered her sanguine response at lunch the other day and the question that had risen in her mind back then. 'Do you have a lover?'

Eva swallowed, looking sheepish, then defiant. '… When I want to.'

'What does that mean?'

'There is a man I see on occasion. It is not serious. I am not looking for complication. And it is all on my terms.'

'Is he married too?'

'*Bien sûr.*'

Lise gave a sour smile that it was all so expected. 'Wow … Does Pierre know?'

'I don't rub it in his face, if that's what you mean. We are discreet. But I know he suspects.'

'And he has a lover?'

Eva nodded, but a flash of pain contracted over her face.

‘How long? How long has your marriage been open like this?’

Eva flicked ash into the saucer again, her mouth drawn in a nervous line. ‘For me, a few months.’

‘And Pierre?’

She shrugged. ‘Longer.’

‘But you both made it past the first month, at least?’ Lise couldn’t keep the resentment from her words.

‘Lise …’

‘For all I know, Valentin was already going strong from the first hours of our marriage.’

‘Look, I know it’s a shock, and I agree, this is … early. But as you saw at the lunch, this is how things are here. It’s a sign of being free. Liberal—’

‘Please don’t say *modern*,’ Lise muttered, looking away. She felt as if her ribcage was being corseted, the bones pulled in tighter and tighter, making it impossible to take a full breath. ‘They must all have been laughing at me. Thinking me so naive.’

‘No one was laughing. Everyone thinks you are the most amazing couple.’

‘It’s a sham, Eva! All for show. I only see him at embassy events in the evenings. The two of us and six hundred of our closest friends! Did he marry me just to have a plus-one on tap? Because I look the part?’ She looked at her old friend, tears pooling in her eyes. ‘Did he ever love me?’

‘He does love you! This doesn’t change anything. Don’t blow it out of proportion. Men just have needs, that’s all.’

But Lise shook her head. ‘It’s not that.’ She thought back on all the times she’d whispered filthy nothings in his ear that were met with a regretful smile; waited up in bed for him, only to wake up alone with the light still on … and a thought came to her. If this was just about lust, he could have had that with her. He wasn’t a man being denied his needs at home. But she had been the one chasing, and he … he had been running.

‘Oh, God.’ Her voice cracked on the words.

‘What?’

‘What if it’s not many women? … What if it’s only one?’ She fell still as she realized this could somehow become even worse than she had feared. Unmet needs and a carousel of pretty faces was one thing, but an affair of the heart …? ‘Eva, is my husband in love with someone else?’

The question had been rhetorical, an articulation of a stream of consciousness that was dizzying in its speed. She was exhausted, overwrought … and yet, Eva was sitting before her with no disguise, and Lise saw the shock register in her eyes as she accidentally hit upon a truth.

'… He is?'

Fear bloomed on Eva's face. 'Wait—'

'And you knew?' Lise whispered. 'All this time …?'

'If you let me explain—'

Lise felt her shock double down. First her husband's betrayal, now her best friend's? 'Who is she? Tell me!'

Eva stubbed out her cigarette, her jaw grinding with nerves. She looked grey.

'Tell me!' Lise snapped. 'Is it … oh, my God. Is it you!?'

Eva's head whipped up. 'It's Beatrice Chevalier.'

The name didn't register, not immediately – but then, swimming out from her subconscious, she remembered narrow, watchful eyes and a cold smile. That whiplash comment.

'*Her?*'

'Look, she … she and Valentin have been friends since college. It's been going on for years.' Eva could scarcely get the words out.

Suddenly Lise remembered seeing Valentin talking to the woman in pearls at the reception that very first night. They had maintained a proper distance but they had been talking closely, with a familiarity, an ease between them that was at odds with the stiff formality of the rest of the evening. Lise had almost recalled her at the lunch, but not quite; only a faint echo of recognition had sounded. But she hadn't been looking, then, for a rival.

'Then why didn't he marry her?' she asked in a strangled voice. 'If it's been that long …?'

'She was forced to marry into a banking family when she was twenty. Financial troubles. Her father was about to lose everything.'

It felt to Lise like the floor was bowing, as if she were being sucked in and down, away from the light. 'So, then, it's really love.'

'Who knows, Lise? When he got engaged to you, we could all see how happy he was. We thought he had moved on at last. That he'd let her go. Beatrice was livid. She swore she would never see him again. Said she hated him, that he was betraying her. But …'

But they couldn't stay away from each other.

Lise felt her chest tighten as the reason why her husband had never married before now tangled into her worst fear – Valentin had never loved her. If he couldn't marry the woman he loved, he was still an ambassador in need of a wife. She really was simply there for show, to look good and play the part for his new plum job.

She remembered Beatrice's jibe at lunch, about the Swiss sitting on the fence … Had she issued Valentin with an ultimatum to choose? Said she'd leave her husband for him at last? Lise could imagine his dilemma. A divorcée wife wouldn't sit well with his career, but to turn his back on her altogether …

Had the other women known? Was that why they'd asked her if she too would take a lover? She had felt superior, but had they been the ones pitying her all the while?

Lise looked at her old friend with new clarity. 'You didn't have the lunch for me,' she said quietly, seeing it all now. 'You weren't trying to help me settle here and make new friends.'

'Lise, no, I was!' Eva's eyes were wide, her hands reaching for her across the table.

'Yes? It was all your idea?'

'Yes.'

'No! You said at Café de Flore they wanted to meet me. Who, exactly? Whose idea was it?'

Eva hesitated, and her silence told Lise all she had needed to know. She pulled away as she shook her head. 'Beatrice wanted to observe me at close quarters. She wanted to meet her lover's wife in a setting where she was in control. You let me walk into the lion's den, Eva.'

'No. I … I thought they were done. Over. When you told me about you and him, I thought he'd turned the page at last. Beatrice tricked me. She said they had stopped talking.'

Lise pushed her chair back roughly. It scraped along the floor, leaving two thick black lines on the tiles, but she didn't care. Betrayal was everywhere. There was no one left she could trust.

'Lise, what are you going to do?' Eva cried, running after her as she headed for the door. 'Stay here! We can talk about this. You mustn't do anything rash!'

Lise stepped out into the hall and started down the stairs, tears brimming in her eyes, blood rushing through her head.

‘Lise, please!’ Eva cried, but she was caught at her own doorway, unable to follow. Lise’s world might be falling apart, but Eva couldn’t be seen in public without her face on.

That was just how it was here. They were liberal and modern.

But not, by Lise’s definition, free.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lake Geneva
1 December 2026

The fire crackled, flames flickering almost in time with the piano notes of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* playing quietly in the background. Outside, a heavy mist was creeping in from the lake and wrapping itself around the villa like a chiffon veil.

Dulcie sat by the card table, her eyes roaming listlessly over the heap of photographs. She had managed to separate most of them while they were still damp and before they fused together, leaving them to dry in rows along the kitchen counters, much to Helda's chagrin. The colours were bleached with age anyway and some watermarks had degraded the images further, but most had been salvaged.

Now that they were dry and crinkled, she had sorted through them countless times, but they never gave up more than they showed: faces with no names, places with no setting. Mountains, but which? Gardens, but whose? The lake, but where? Everything was familiar and yet not specific. Only the view from the terrace here was a direct link to the woman lying beside her in the bed.

Dulcie knew it was a futile task. Like trying to catch a thread in the wind, she was grasping for a last connection with her family's past; something more to anchor her now she was facing the prospect of being truly left alone in the world. She knew that she had left it too late to ask questions about her grandmother's and mother's lives, always thinking there was more time, that they'd have another tomorrow; but in the years after her parents' deaths, she hadn't wanted to look back. She had been angry at the cards she'd been dealt, resentful that she was so markedly different to her friends,

a tragic character in her own life. She just wanted to be like everyone else – mindless, frivolous, careless. Her grief didn't show up as tears and frailty but numbness and party-girl mania. She didn't want to connect but to escape. She submerged herself in superficial friendships and doomed relationships, preferring to be the one controlling the outcome. She did the dumping, the walking-away, the cutting-off and ghosting. She was everyone's friend, but no one really knew her. Boyfriends loved parading her but quickly grew tired of her opaque heart. She had made herself an island that others swam round and admired, but none could reach – and only now did she feel the whistling isolation as cold waters lapped her shores.

The elderly stranger in the guest room was proof that she had left it all too late. His oblique remarks had hinted at stories she had never heard, secrets in her grandmother's life she had never suspected. *She needs to know the truth. About Valentin's death. And everything that came afterwards.*

It was alarming, to say the least. Dulcie had pushed him for clarification but he wouldn't be drawn, pleading a confidential matter between old friends. But how was she supposed to forget a statement like that? It had become seared in her mind not just from some morbid sense of curiosity but because it hit on the nerve that, shamefully, she actually had no idea what had happened to her grandfather. He had died not only before Dulcie's birth, but her mother's too. His death had already existed for longer than his life. He had never lived here at Villa Mirelle, so even the long-serving Marchands hadn't met him. He was a concept, not even a memory, and she had grown up with the lore that he'd died in an accident. As a very little girl, she had accepted that without question – especially as it had been overshadowed all too soon by her parents' own accident, a far bigger tragedy in her life.

Dulcie stared at the box, knowing it was a wild, futile hope that she might yet find something illuminating inside; that a lone picture of the terrace would somehow tether her more strongly to her family's past. She looked up as Helda came in. The housekeeper's expression was pensive, which was never a good thing. There was always order in Helda's world, no such thing as the unexpected; every possibility was always anticipated. But something had rattled her, Dulcie could see.

'Is everything okay?'

Helda hesitated. ‘I thought you’d want to know that I just found Monsieur Wagstaff in the study.’

Dulcie frowned. ‘I’m sorry?’ Her grandmother’s study was a small but pretty room set off to one side of the library. It faced north and east and didn’t have a lake view, but her grandmother had always preferred to do her paperwork and correspondence from there, feeling less ‘distracted’ in the cosy space. It was dual aspect and big enough for a partner’s desk, a pair of wing armchairs and a housekeeper’s cupboard in which historic ledgers fought for space with spare tureens. ‘What was he doing in there?’

‘He said he was looking for some paper.’

Dulcie blinked. ‘Paper?’

‘To write a letter.’

The drawers in the desk were lockable – but not locked, as she recalled; there was no need. No one but Dulcie or Helda ever went in there. She thought of the paperwork inside: bills, invoices, old thank-you cards, but more sensitive material too. Bank statements, lawyers’ letters, her grandmother’s will …

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. ‘He couldn’t have asked you first? Or just sent an email like a normal person?’ Although she supposed someone of Wagstaff’s age wouldn’t necessarily know how.

She noticed Helda’s po-faced expression. The Marchands had both been perturbed by the stranger’s insistence – barely couched as a request – on staying here; only his advanced age and physical frailty had convinced Georges that he didn’t pose a danger in the dead of night. ‘Unless … Do you think he wasn’t really looking for paper?’

‘Well, I don’t know what else he could have been looking for,’ Helda shrugged with a rare look of concession. ‘And he did seem quite confused and embarrassed. He was very apologetic. He said he went in the wrong door.’

Still, a ‘but’ hung in the air.

Dulcie considered for a moment. Confused. Embarrassed. Apologetic. None of those were descriptions she would have applied to their uninvited guest. He had seemed resolute and perceptive – shrewd, even – when they had spoken. ‘What’s he doing now?’

‘Taking a walk around the grounds.’

‘It could be icy out there.’ Rain had been falling on and off as sleet for the past few days as the temperature continued to plummet, the snowline on

the mountains across the lake drawing ever lower.

‘Yes; don’t worry, Georges is with him. Keeping an eye as well as offering an arm.’

Dulcie went to the window and looked out, spotting the two men below, walking through the old vineyards in their coats and hats. The wineland stretched down towards the water’s edge, the vines planted in neat rows, this year’s crop rotted on the boughs, like all the other years. It had been decades since they had run the vineyard as a commercial venture. Back in the fifties and sixties, the small batches of chasselas had been highly regarded and were sought out by serious aficionados. But when her grandmother had inherited, it had become just a hobby, then an afterthought … She had been too busy raising Dulcie’s mother by then, her second marriage rocky from the very start, and she had wallpapered over the cracks with extravagant parties and grand balls. It was after the divorce – ‘vicious’, her mother had told her, and ‘years too late’ – that she had been bitten by what she called ‘the black dog’; the endless social whirl came to a juddering stop and for many years afterwards the villa fell into a preternatural quietude, the vineyard neglected. It wasn’t the only thing to wither in that time. The relationship between mother and daughter grew strained, and years of estrangement followed. Only when Dulcie’s mother had finally found love with her father did she experience at last the peaceful family life she herself had never known.

When Dulcie had been born, the hurts of the past had been healed for them all. They each rejoiced in her, the villa coming alive again on their frequent visits as birthdays, summers, Christmases were spent amid these ancient timbers. New memories were made, and when the very worst happened, the place of her holidays had become home. It had seen her family’s best and worst times, always standing stoic behind them … but the vineyard had never been revived.

‘He seems very interested,’ she murmured. ‘I just bet he’s a wine connoisseur.’

‘Georges says the diplomats could always drink the navy under the table,’ Helda replied. ‘Would you like Georges to ask him to leave? I can pack his bags.’

Dulcie’s eyes narrowed as she continued watching them. She felt mildly unnerved that their guest had been found wandering around the house. It was true he posed no physical threat, was softly spoken and gently

mannered; and yet there was something forceful – or perhaps *persuasive* was a better word – in his demeanour. He had turned up on the doorstep not once but twice and wangled an invitation to stay here, despite her evident resistance.

And yet, and yet, she argued with herself – he was an old, old man. Just because he had been mentally competent during their brief initial discussion didn't mean he wasn't suffering from some sort of cognitive decline too. Confusion was to be expected at his age, surely? The fog might come and go, as her grandmother's had – until it had finally come and not left again. It was completely within the realms of possibility that the situation was entirely innocent.

She remembered his plea for being here, the message he had to impart before her grandmother died. Dulcie had sensed his urgency. He hadn't been faking that. She believed there really was something her grandmother had to know, and now she wanted to know it too.

'He can stay for another night or two,' she said finally. 'But no more than that. I'm not having him setting up camp here indefinitely. If Granny doesn't wake up in that time, then she really is too far gone to be having any conversations at all; but at least I'll have done my bit.' She turned back to face into the room. 'But if we can keep close tabs on him from now on?'

'Of course. Georges will be his constant companion, whether Monsieur Wagstaff likes it or not.' Helda looked at the nurse. '… Anything this afternoon?'

'No,' Anna replied.

Dulcie watched as the housekeeper went over to the bed and squeezed her grandmother's hand lightly. It was her way of paying respect whenever she came into the room; she could never bear the thought of just talking around her employer, ignoring her … Anna had warned them all that the end would look like this: a constant pulling-away, a tide that would never come back in. But Dulcie couldn't make her brain believe it. She couldn't bear the thought of death creeping slowly up on her grandmother, like a silk scarf being pulled over her face; endless oblivion until the body just silently, invisibly gave out. It felt like a midnight theft was taking place as they all looked on.

'You must both be hungry,' Helda said, drawing back. 'Shall I bring up some tea and cake?'

Anna nodded. It was exhausting doing nothing. 'Thank you, Helda.'

‘Actually, I’ll have mine downstairs with our guest,’ Dulcie said. ‘After all, I can hardly leave him alone all day.’ She had been sitting by her grandmother’s bedside all day but she felt an unspoken obligation to host too.

‘He did say to tell you not to visit him unless your grandmother wakes up. He doesn’t want to take you away from her unnecessarily – “even for a minute”. Those were his words.’ Helda frowned, giving a suspicious look, refusing to be mollified by his politeness. ‘And he’s right. He’s lucky you’re allowing him to stay under the circumstances. You owe him nothing, including your time.’

Dulcie smiled at Helda’s protectiveness. ‘It’s fine. He’s a harmless old man. He isn’t holding a gun to our heads. I just hope I’m doing the right thing in letting him see Granny if she does wake up.’ She bit her lip. ‘What if what he says upsets her? Who’s to say he’s not some jilted lover, or someone holding a grudge and wanting the last word?’

Anna spoke up. ‘In all likelihood, she won’t know who he is anyway, much less understand what he’s telling her.’

Helda tutted irritably. ‘He has a nerve, coming here unannounced at night and talking in riddles. I say don’t trouble yourself with him, Dulcie. He insists he’s quite content sitting in the drawing room. Apparently he once did a four-day stakeout in the Congo River basin, and this is an “infinitely superior experience”—’

‘Stakeout?’

‘That may have been lost in translation.’ Helda shrugged, twirling her hand impatiently. ‘His French is … colourful.’

‘Well, I’m glad we compare favourably to lying in a marsh!’ Dulcie rolled her eyes. ‘So what’s he been doing all day, besides “looking for paper”?’

‘He was reading the newspapers this morning. Did the crossword. And he has a book, he says, which he’ll read when he comes back inside.’

Dulcie nodded. ‘… Did you manage to get the radiator working in the yellow bedroom?’

‘Yes. He said he was very comfortable last night.’

‘At least he has nice manners,’ Anna offered. Her praise was rarely given.

Dulcie couldn’t help but smile. Having invited himself here, their guest at least seemed to be at pains to not be a pain.

‘It’s fine. I’ll go down and sit with him for a bit.’

‘You are too kind-hearted. That’s not a good thing,’ Helda said, bustling back towards the door.

Anna cleared her throat. ‘Dulcie …’ She pointed at the card table.

Dulcie looked down and saw that her phone was ringing on silent. She saw the name on the illuminated screen.

‘Hey, Quinn.’

‘Dulcie, hi,’ he said, noting her lowered voice. ‘… Good time to speak?’

She glanced towards the bed before getting up and crossing over to the window. ‘Sure.’

‘Just checking that you managed to collect the Signac?’

‘Yes. Safe and sound.’ If he only knew …

‘Great.’ He sounded distracted, and she wondered if they’d received another invoice. ‘So, listen, the reason I’m calling … I’ve just had a rather long boozy, bonding lunch with Rusty Gulliver. He’s landed a contract for a four-hundred-acre estate in Shropshire.’

‘Oh, good for him.’ Rusty was to gardens what the Keswicks had been to houses, and he and they had collaborated on many joint projects together. It was a good move on Quinn’s part to try to consolidate his own relationship with the landscape designer.

‘Yes – and he told me he thinks the house may be coming back up for tender too. Annabel Lyatt was originally lined up, but she’s stepping back: pregnant with twins, apparently.’

Dulcie immediately straightened up. ‘Really?’ This was surprising news on all counts. Annabel had been the Keswicks’ biggest rival, and she had hoovered up some of their clients in the first few weeks after Dick’s death.

‘The owner’s a finance guy based in Hong Kong, name of Hugh Cecil. He’s coming back for a family wedding this week and stopping in Geneva en route to go to the watch sale at Phillips tomorrow. I’ve got a contact there, and he’s managed to get eyes on the guest list … Cecil’s RSVP’d yes for tonight as well.’

It was the preview party Tom Gifford had mentioned at Christie’s, the one she had suggested attending speculatively. ‘You want me to try to speak to him?’

‘If we could lock this down before he goes out to anyone else … I really think this could be the job to put us on the map. It’s a big pile and he’s young, single and loaded. He clearly doesn’t know what to do with all his money if he’s spending it on watches.’

It was a good omen, she agreed. And they definitely needed something prestigious on which to make their mark. Their link to Keswick was time-stamped; like lead boots thrown into a pond, they only had a few moments before they sank into obscurity.

'Listen, I know you can't get away for long, but you wouldn't need to be there for more than half an hour. You know what these things are like … Fifteen minutes of chit-chat, soft pitch, give him your card; then I'll follow up tomorrow and hook him when he gets to London.'

Deals and conversation. Champagne and laughter … It felt a world away from her reality right now. She could imagine Quinn in London, sitting in the office at the back of the store, the small orangery glowing like a lantern, his desk buried in papers and fabric swatches, his mind already scheming.

The silence of this bedroom felt so heavy around her head. Dulcie ran a hand through her hair, knowing she had to do her bit for the company from here too. People died at inconvenient times; it was a horrible fact, but true, and she had to somehow keep a hand on the tiller of her own life. A quick introduction tonight could make all the difference. Besides, it had been her idea in the first place.

She checked the time. It was almost four here now. They were an hour ahead of London. She would need to wash her hair and find something suitable to wear; she hadn't packed for cocktail parties when she'd had the call to get back here. She'd packed for a funeral: black silk.

Afternoon tea with Tatton would have to wait after all. 'Okay. Can your contact put my name down on the door?'

'Already done.'

Dulcie rolled her eyes. She should have known. Quinn's questions were almost always rhetorical. 'Fine. I'll target him SWAT-style – in and out.'

'Great. Text me later and let me know how it goes.'

They hung up, and the room fell quiet again: shadows dancing on the wall and the mist creeping outside the window. Death was hovering in the room, not quite ready to land.

'Hey,' Dulcie said, walking into the garage and blowing on her hands. It had begun sleeting again over lunch; now, as the evening temperatures dropped, snow was lightly falling.

Georges was inside, buffing the paintwork of the black Mercedes to an even higher gleam than usual.

‘You look lovely,’ he smiled, taking in her narrow black coat and teal cashmere scarf as he opened the door for her in the back. He still refused to let her sit up front with him, but at least she had managed to talk him out of wearing his uniform and cap.

‘Thank you.’

She waited as he pulled back the arched, duck-egg-blue doors, one set in a run of four. The garage block was a vast space, situated on the far side of the courtyard opposite the villa. It had herringbone brick floors and the same red roof tiles as the main house. Georges had called it ‘his office’ in the old days, but it was heated only by a three-bar electric heater, and now that he was getting older and no longer driving around for her grandmother, he was more often found in the kitchen with his wife.

The Mercedes was used as their regular vehicle for outings and chores – its safe anonymity was what her grandmother liked about it – but her treasured chocolate-brown Bentley still sat there under its protective cover, and beside it was the navy Jaguar E-type. Georges kept them all in top order, as if ‘the boss’ might still get out of bed for a drive. They were polished, serviced and taken out at regular intervals to keep the engines turning over. Dulcie supposed that at some point in the not-so-distant future, she was going to have to make a decision about what to do with them, but it wasn’t a conversation she could bring herself to have with Georges just yet. That was not only because she didn’t want to confront her grandmother’s death ahead of time, but because it begged other, bigger questions: what would she do with the villa? It was far too big for her, especially once the Marchands retired, which they almost certainly would once her grandmother passed on. They were only still here from loyalty alone – over sixty years of service now – and had long passed retirement age themselves. She knew her grandmother had generously provided for them in her will – but the thought of living here without them …

Georges slid into the driver’s seat and started up the engine. The car purred, mighty but restrained, as they pulled onto the circular drive and circuited the stone fountain in the middle of the courtyard. She looked up at the villa as they passed: thick ivy was neatly clipped and trained along the middle and lower levels. Short wings flanked each end of the main building, forming a self-enclosed courtyard with the garage opposite and housing the working functions of the villa – the old laundry, stores, the kitchens – leaving the rooms of the main building as grand reception

spaces. There was even an old ballroom, although it was decades since anyone had danced in there. Dulcie had used it for rollerblading practice when she was little, and its mirrored walls had been perfect for her barre work when she'd briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a ballerina before deciding boys were more fun.

They drove along in easy silence, the radio on low and the route clear on the way into the city. Headlights streamed towards them as commuters made their way home. To her right lay the lake, heavy with darkness, and beyond it the mountains, which would, in a few weeks, be populated by the thrill-seeking hordes. She wondered how much snow had fallen up there today if it had begun snowing down here too. Eighteen inches? More?

The city lights began to brighten their horizon, Georges tapping smoothly on the brakes as he expertly navigated the narrowing streets to their destination, no satnav required.

'You know, you really didn't have to take me in tonight. I could have driven.'

'After the parking fiasco the other day?' he tutted. 'Much easier for me to do it.'

She rolled her eyes, knowing she wouldn't hear the end of her car almost being towed, not to mention leaving a small treasure on the ground. 'Ha ha.'

'Besides, you can have some wine this way.'

'Well, it's work, not pleasure, so …' She felt another flutter of butterflies take wing in her stomach. She was nervous about walking in on her own. It wasn't like London, where she knew people.

'Even more reason to have a drink, then. Something to take the edge off all that networking.'

'I suppose so.'

He pulled up outside the address. Inside, the lobby was packed with bodies, people laughing and talking loudly, glasses of champagne in their hands as serving staff moved between them with trays of canapés.

She swallowed again as she watched from the car. She could always turn back and tell Quinn she hadn't been able to get away after all.

'Make eye contact and smile,' Georges said, meeting her gaze in the rear-view mirror. 'Your grandmother always said that was her tactic – it's almost impossible for people not to smile back. It breaks the ice. But if you're

sinking faster than *Titanic*, I'll be parked right across the street here for a quick getaway.'

'Thanks, Georges.'

She got out and gave her name to the security man. The door was opened without hesitation and she slipped inside. Handing over her coat, she took a glass of champagne and moved slowly through the crowd; she pretended to look at the watches laid out in glass displays and admire the artwork on the walls, all the while scanning the room for the person she had come here to meet. That was easier said than done when he didn't have any social media. If she only knew what he looked like … She didn't want to get caught up in endless conversations with people she would never see again. She just need to fulfil this one targeted chat and she would be gone …

'Dulcie, you made it!'

She turned to see Tom Gifford making his way over. There was a touch of colour to his cheeks, a fresh glass in his hand.

'Tom, hi.'

'You look *très chic* this evening.'

'Thanks.' She didn't want to think about where the black silk dress would be worn next. 'Have you been here long?'

'Just got here, saw you coming in actually. So – are you a watch fan?'

'Well, my father had a few nice ones …' She realized she had never really looked at them. They were in a vault along with some other valuables, but a watch was a watch to her. A means to telling the time. 'But I've never really understood the excitement around chronographs and fancy bevels.'

'Ah, but have you ever really appreciated a tourbillon?'

'Given I have no idea what that is, no.'

'Well, then, you were right to start at the very top. If these watches don't impress you, nothing will. Let me show you one that I think may make your pulse quicken … This way.' He led her towards a display in the middle of the space and pointed towards a watch with a brown leather strap and chocolate-brown face. He waited for her response.

'Very nice,' Dulcie said after a moment, unable to muster up any more enthusiasm than that.

'Nice? Ouch!' He grinned. 'That's a Patek Philippe Grandmaster Chime.'

It meant nothing to her. 'Okay.'

'Guess the estimate.'

‘Um,’ she deliberated, trying to make a wild guess. ‘Fifteen thousand?’

He left a dramatic pause. ‘… Try three million.’

‘Three …?’ Her eyes widened as she gasped. ‘But who would pay that?’

Gifford motioned to the room. ‘Most of the people in here.’

‘Would you?’ she whispered.

‘Would that I could! Sadly, you’d need to knock a couple of zeros off to hit my budget.’

‘But even that …’ She looked more closely at the watch. ‘That’s madness. Is it waterproof?’

‘No.’

‘So you can’t wear it in the shower?’

‘Definitely not. The strap’s crocodile skin.’

She looked at him. ‘… But they live in the water!’

He laughed loudly, and several people turned at the commotion. Tom Gifford had no problem with being the centre of attention, although Dulcie wanted to shy away.

One man – dark blonde, brown eyes, sleeper physique – did a double take as he glanced over, a smile growing on his lips as he seemed to recognize Tom, though his eyes lingered on her.

‘Gifford?’ he murmured, extending a hand. A flash of silver and double cuffs extended from his impeccably cut suit jacket, a trim of ivory silk peeking from his handkerchief pocket. He radiated poise, affluence and self-assurance, although that was hardly distinctive in a room like this. ‘God, how’s long it been?’

‘Got to be going on ten years,’ Tom replied as they pumped hands.

‘Didn’t know you were a watch man.’

‘Only in theory. This is rather outside my tax bracket.’

‘Didn’t I always say you should have gone into finance?’ The man shrugged with a knowing look.

‘You could be right. I thought you were in Honkers?’

‘Still am, just passing through. Although we should grab a drink before I go back. I’ve got something that might be of interest to you.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘Not important now. I’ll tell you later …’ His gaze skimmed Dulcie’s way again, his attention settling upon her with open curiosity now. ‘Aren’t you going to introduce us?’

Tom motioned towards her. ‘Sorry, yes – Dulcie, forgive me. This is Hugh Cecil, an old schoolmate. Cecil, Dulcie Beaumont.’

What? She smiled, although it took everything in her not to betray her surprise and delight to have stumbled – on her first pass – upon the very person she had come here to find! She could hardly believe her good luck. ‘… How do you do.’

His hand clasped hers, holding it for a moment. ‘Are you in the market for a watch, Ms Beaumont?’

‘Well, Tom’s trying to convince me of their merit. I can’t believe they’ll reach these estimates.’

‘I wish they wouldn’t,’ he said, looking down at the Patek Philippe. ‘But that one will likely go well over, I fear.’ He gave a rueful smile that implied he was interested in it.

‘Are you intending to bid tomorrow?’

‘I’m registered to, but I’ll decide in the moment.’

‘Which one has caught your eye?’

He looked amused. ‘Well, now, that probably isn’t something I should disclose in advance.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, for all I know you could be scoping me out for another bidder.’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘Is that a thing? … It sounds very Bond.’

‘Well, you could very well be a Bond girl.’

It was an openly flirtatious compliment, and for a moment she wondered that he should be so bold given she was here with his friend. Then again, if they’d been at school together, he already knew she wasn’t Tom’s type.

He took a sip of his drink, regarding her. ‘So, Miss Beaumont, if watches aren’t your thing, let me guess what is … Birkins?’

‘No.’

‘Hmm. Christian Louboutins, then?’

‘Not those either.’ She put him out of his misery – and clichés. ‘Actually, I have a particular fondness for Regency toleware.’

‘That’s a new one on me.’ He seemed pleasantly surprised.

‘I have my own interior design company. Liking rare, beautiful, expensive things is an occupational hazard.’

She knew she had to set down her marker quickly. If his aside to Tom just now about talking to him later was about the house, she had to put herself in the running without appearing to go into outright competition with him.

Hugh Cecil had no idea she knew anything about it, and she had to hope Tom was still oblivious to Hugh's country pile too.

'I can see how it would be,' Hugh said, looking at her as if she herself was rare, beautiful and expensive. 'Do you live in Geneva?'

'London mainly,' she replied. 'You?'

'Currently Hong Kong, but looking to move back in the next year or—'

'Cecil, sorry. I had to see a woman about a bed.' A voice carried over his shoulder, and he turned.

Dulcie blinked as she found herself staring straight at Alejandro. For the second time in a matter of minutes she had to swallow down her shock, especially as his comment landed.

Hugh Cecil laughed. 'Well, that came out badly!' he said, slapping a hand on Alejandro's shoulder and squeezing it. 'What my friend means to say is, he has some accommodation issues at present and needs to find a new place to stay.'

Tom grinned and immediately offered his hand. Dulcie knew Mediterranean men were exactly his type. 'Tom Gifford.'

'Alejandro Riveras.'

'And this is …'

'Dulcie, yes,' Alejandro replied, looking every bit as stunned as she felt.

Hugh's eyes narrowed fractionally as he observed them. 'Well, well, this is turning into an evening of reunions. You know each other too?'

'Yes—' Alejandro began.

'Not r—' Dulcie said at the same time. 'I mean, we've met once.'

'Twice, actually. Technically. But who's counting …?' Alejandro shrugged, holding her gaze with an intense look. She remembered how they had left things at the studio, caught in a pause, straddled on the cusp of imminent surrender. She felt her body heat up in his presence – she had walked away, expecting never to see him again; telling herself it was the wrong time; that he was a loverboy who flirted with everyone, even his clients …

And now it transpired he was friends with the very man she needed to make a client. Her good luck had seemingly hit a speed bump.

'Where did you two meet?' Hugh fished.

'At Christie's,' she said quickly, knowing she couldn't afford to be distracted by Alejandro's arrival. Tonight was about one thing and one thing

only: winning that contract. She glanced at Tom and smiled. ‘I was picking up the Signac.’

He nodded ruefully. ‘Nice piece.’

‘Nice? You were desperate for it,’ she teased, before looking back at Hugh. ‘He’s sore because I outbid him.’

‘And me too, it would appear,’ Hugh smiled, stuffing one hand in his trouser pocket.

She blinked. ‘You bid for it too?’

‘Telephone bid,’ he shrugged. ‘But I was in two minds and it quickly soared past my limit.’

‘Didn’t know you had one,’ Tom quipped.

‘I try to be disciplined about these things,’ Hugh shrugged. ‘But I’m wondering now if I may have missed an opportunity? I should have had a pro on my team.’

‘Well, you’ve got my number, old boy,’ Tom said quickly, but Hugh’s eyes were on Dulcie. ‘… She overpaid for it. It’s about knowing when to stop.’

‘Nonsense.’ She shrugged. ‘It’s worth what someone’s willing to pay, and our client had their heart set on it. It’s absolutely right for the space and that was all that mattered. The heart wants what it wants, does it not? For Mr Cecil here—’

‘Hugh,’ Cecil insisted.

She smiled. ‘For Hugh, it’s a watch you can’t even wear in the shower. For our client, a perfect oil by her reading chair. It’s not for anyone else to say what that sense of satisfaction is worth.’

Hugh smiled, watching her; she could see thoughts running behind his eyes and knew her words had hit the mark. ‘Well, I shall try to remember that if my nerve fails me when I’m bidding tomorrow.’

‘Oh, you don’t strike me as a man whose nerve fails him,’ she replied, sipping her champagne. It was a bold comment that played to his ego, and it hung in the air for a moment.

‘And how do you two know each other?’ Tom asked, looking between Hugh and Alejandro.

‘We met travelling in Costa Rica when we were eighteen,’ Hugh replied with a warm look. ‘Specifically, he almost killed me with a surfboard.’

‘You dropped in on me,’ Alejandro argued. ‘You had it coming.’

‘Debatable. But somehow we became friends anyway.’ He slapped Alejandro’s shoulder again, gripping it tightly. ‘We don’t get to see each other anywhere near as regularly as we’d like, of course, but I always make a point of stopping here when I’m back in Europe. Much easier seeing you here than in Valencia.’

Alejandro gave him a sceptical look. ‘Nowhere’s difficult when you’re flying corporate.’

‘We always get dinner and shoot the breeze, don’t we? Talk about old times.’ Hugh’s eyes widened as he looked at Alejandro, then at Dulcie, as if a thought had just struck him. But she knew exactly what was coming.

‘Hey, why don’t the two of you join us this evening? If you don’t have plans, I mean? I’d be interested to pick your brains on tomorrow’s top picks, Tom … And I definitely want to explore Dulcie’s Regency toleware fetish.’

Dulcie laughed at the joke, noticing a shadow pass over Alejandro’s face.

‘Dulcie won’t be able to,’ Alejandro said for her. Looking straight at her. ‘You have family commitments, no?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You said you cannot go to dinner because you have family commitments.’

‘When did she say that?’ Hugh asked, looking puzzled.

She had said it when he’d asked her out for dinner on the phone, but the others didn’t know that, and Dulcie stared back at Alejandro, understanding at once why he didn’t want her to join them. It had nothing to do with ring-fencing her time with her grandmother and everything to do with stopping her from flirting with his friend. But he didn’t know how badly she needed this job.

‘Actually, I—’ She pulled her phone from her bag and checked it for messages quickly. There were none, and she had made Helda swear on Georges’s soul that she would text if her grandmother so much as yawned. ‘I’m free. You, Tom?’

‘Yes, great!’ he shrugged.

‘Great,’ Dulcie said, smiling brightly, even though Alejandro glowered.

‘Great,’ Hugh Cecil grinned, looking like the cat before a saucer of cream.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Paris
23 August 1962

‘Madame.’ The waiter set down her coffee and croque monsieur.

‘*Merci*,’ Lise mumbled, not looking up. He wasn’t her usual waiter and this wasn’t her usual café, but how could she go to Café de Flore? It was her husband’s haunt – him and his set. She would be seen; she would be judged. At least here, in the enemy camp, she could sit unnoticed. No one cared that her face was un-made-up or her eyes were puffy; that her hair was unbrushed or even that her shoes were off, for she had walked until her feet bled. Even then she hadn’t stopped, just taken them off and carried them in her hand, blind to the stares shot in her direction as she passed. No one had recognized her; the city’s new darling had become a foundling, as lost and abandoned as if Valentin had handed her over to the nuns himself.

She had been all over the city – up the hill at Montparnasse; walking past the animal enclosures at the zoo, sitting on the Bateaux Mouches as they went up, down and up the Seine again on their interminable loops. She had walked trying to work out where she had gone wrong; when exactly she had failed and driven her husband back into the arms of another woman. Hadn’t she tried to be the perfect wife? Didn’t she learn her lines every day like a Broadway actress, wear the clothes like a mannequin, smile and greet the most difficult of guests like an ambassador’s wife should? Why wasn’t it enough?

She stared at the sandwich and reached for another cigarette instead, sucking greedily on it for sustenance. She hadn’t eaten all day, but her appetite was shot. Her hands were shaking as she exhaled fully after the first drag, her body slumping with exhaustion, legs splayed in front of her,

feet bare on the mosaic-tiled floor. It had a leaf-scroll border and she traced it with her big toe. No one cared; it was probably a testament to her bohemian credentials, proof she belonged here after all.

The walls were mirrored, reflecting endlessly the scenes playing out in there: waiters in long, starched white aprons gliding through with trays; lovers meeting, their heads and knees pressed together as they talked and kissed openly; tables of students debating loudly; men in open-necked shirts and women in sundresses and sandals flirting over Gauloises and red wine.

It had felt like a dangerous transgression coming in here, a forbidden and illicit departure from her designated path, but she didn't feel the otherness she had been conditioned to expect. In fact, she felt at home. She liked that she was wearing gardening clothes, crumpled and stained with grass on the knees, and no one batted an eye. Café de Flore was all about seeing and being seen, but here, at Les Deux Magots, there was comfort in the anonymity of a crowd; it was more desirable to blend in than to stand out, and she felt a visceral sense of relief. Ever since her arrival in this city she had been on constant display, a moving museum piece.

Did Valentin even know she had gone, or was he still briefing the great and the good on what he knew about the president's enemies? Did he have any idea his own secret was out and their fledgling marriage in tatters?

She would stay here all day, she decided. Maybe even all night. She would exist on cigarettes and coffee, and then … then she didn't know what. Walking back through the doors of the embassy felt impossible: Sylvie, waiting for her with summary profiles of tonight's dignitaries, her dress already selected, shortened and steamed … She tried to remember what they were honouring or commemorating or celebrating this time. She couldn't. She no longer cared.

She ground out the cigarette in the ashtray and immediately lit another one. The sandwich was cold now, the coffee no longer steaming. Perhaps she should get drunk instead, swap coffee for wine and drink until she was numb.

She looked around with dull eyes, surrounded by others' mellow happiness but held apart from it. As the minutes ticked past, anonymity was beginning to feel like something different: isolation.

Her gaze fell on a woman in the darkest corner, thick glossy dark hair worn loose over her shoulders and held back with a band. Her hairline was low and when she turned occasionally, Lise caught a slight underbite in

profile. She looked like a young Maria Callas, more lightly drawn. Her tanned arms were bare and the top button had come undone on her floral sundress.

Her face was largely obscured by the head of her companion sitting opposite – a dark-haired man, not the man Lise had seen walking with her last week – but she still knew it was her. Picasso's young wife. The man was talking intently to her, leaning in on his elbows and gesticulating with his hands, the woman sitting cross-legged as she listened. No one else seemed to have noticed who she was – was she anonymous without her husband's validating presence? – or if they had, they weren't showing it.

Lise pulled on the cigarette, inhaling the smoke deeply, as she watched them talk, tapping the ash butts into the ashtray every few moments, almost in a meditation.

She was on her third when they got up, the dark-haired man pushing his chair back as they stood. He reached for his jacket, hanging on a hook on the wall behind the woman, as she began making her way across the room. Eyes swivelled, though not heads, a studied composure settling over the previously discombobulated factions in the café. The students stopped arguing, the lovers stopped kissing as they passed by. This woman was known to them after all, her proximity to power understood.

Lise didn't stop smoking – powerful men were out of her good graces at this particular moment in time – but as the couple passed, she flicked her eyes up and saw the woman regarding her, perhaps intrigued by her chain-smoking and bare feet; perhaps understanding her feminine pain. Behind her, her companion stared too, but his expression was more inscrutable as he took in Lise's dishevelled state.

She caught her breath, the cigarette suspended in mid-air as she watched them walk out together, talking for several moments more before they shook hands and walked in opposite directions down the street. She waited, heart pounding, knowing he would come back; that this departure was for show and he would loop back in as soon as the coast was clear.

But Leo Santos didn't return.

Valentin adjusted his tie. His day had proceeded with its usual greased ease, the night's high crisis now mellowed to 'an unfortunate incident' as arrests were made. Lise sat at his dressing table, watching the fluidity of his life as he fiddled with his cufflinks, smoothed his lapel; he moved seamlessly

between places and people, everything always set up and arranged for him so that he could do what he did best: placate. Smooth. Enable.

It was clear from the moment he'd come in that he had no idea of what she'd discovered or how her day had passed. Sylvie did. She had taken one look at Lise as she'd walked back in and known – as women do – that there had been a rupture of sorts, a rip in their silken life. But she kept her fears to herself. Unlike Otto, Sylvie respected the boundaries of a marriage; she understood the sanctity of a private relationship in a public life.

Sylvie had swept her up and Lise, too defeated to resist, had allowed herself to go through the motions as her hair was set and her make-up applied in readiness for this evening's event; but it was a brandy, not a portfolio, that was placed in her hand. Slowly Lise felt a part of herself revive: shock had given way to numbness, and now it was moving into resolve. She might have been blindsided by the revelation, played for a fool by his lover, but that didn't mean she couldn't fight for her husband. She was younger than Beatrice and objectively more beautiful; she came from a distinguished family … And she was his wife. Legal status alone gave her precedence over some shabby mistress.

She watched him now as he tied the laces on his polished evening shoes and knew she had to tell him. Denial was pretence and there had already been too much of that between them. There had to be honesty if there was going to be commitment. She couldn't go out there tonight and play her role if she wasn't doing it all for him. She could forgive him, so long as they were united going forward.

'Valentin, I want you to know that I know.' Her voice was low, gentle almost, like a mother to her child.

He looked up at her, a half-smile on his face. 'Know?'

'About Beatrice.' It amazed her that two such unremarkable words could carry so much destruction within them.

Time skipped a beat – two – as he froze, before catching himself and falling into the slipstream again. 'I see.' He cleared his throat. '… Who told you?'

'The lipstick on your collar.' It was only half an answer, but there was no need to drag Eva into this. That was another complication she had no idea how to resolve, and it would have to wait for another day. Or week.

'I apologize, *chérie*,' he said, starting on the other shoe. 'That was indiscreet. Forgive me …'

She stared at him, not sure she understood.

‘I would never want to embarrass you.’

‘… So it’s the indiscretion you’re sorry about, not the affair?’

He glanced at her with a puzzled look, as if she were the one being confounding. ‘Shall we discuss it later? The guests will be—’

‘No. Now, please.’ She was perfectly calm. The clock running down gave her a leverage she wouldn’t have later. He needed quick resolution; she needed answers, agreement. Strategy.

He rose to standing and looked down at her. ‘What more is there to say?’

‘How about you’re not going to see her anymore?’

He laughed. ‘Lise, darling.’ He shook his head, seeming incredulous at the suggestion.

‘I mean it, Valentin. I know you’ve enjoyed your bachelor life and perhaps … perhaps before, it was acceptable for you to take up with another man’s wife—’

‘Take up?’ A rare flash of anger arrowed through the words, but he caught himself. ‘It was a little more serious than that. We go back a long way, she and I.’

‘But she married someone else.’

He didn’t reply; discretion was his greatest virtue, but she could see it took effort not to argue his case. It hurt him to have to lose the point he wanted to win.

‘And you’re married now too,’ she said, her voice breaking with pain. Did this really need to be spelled out? ‘You asked me to be your bride. We’ve been wed less than a month!’

‘And I said I am sorry that I was careless,’ he said in a tight voice, turning away.

Careless? She watched as he crossed the room, pulling his comb from his jacket and smoothing his hair. Self-soothing.

‘It’s not a question of being tidy,’ she said in amazement. ‘It’s about honouring our vows. Respecting one another.’

‘I do respect you. There is no woman I respect more. Look – see the life I am providing for you.’ He motioned to the opulent room, her borrowed jewels. ‘If that’s not respect—’

‘It’s ownership!’ The word was out before she had a chance to think about it, but once articulated – shaped – she knew it was true. ‘My God,

Valentin, what is this? You are making me feel like you married me just because I look the part!'

His back remained turned, but he stopped combing.

Her breath caught in her throat as her words hit oil. Was that the truth? 'Am I really just another … accessory to you? Like that lamp? Or that painting?'

He looked back and she saw the tension in his mouth, his lips drawn in as if he were physically restraining himself from leaking a truth. From agreeing with her. It was even more devastating than the lipstick mark.

'Lise, that is not fair. You know you are far more to me than that.' He came over and placed his hands on her arms; he was considering his words carefully, she could see. 'We make a great team, you and I,' he said, with effort. 'Let's not spoil it. The best marriages are built on trust, respect, friendship—'

'Friendship?'

'Of course. You are young, you've got your whole future ahead of you. There's plenty of time for you still to fall in love if that's what you want.'

It felt as if a vice had been strapped around her torso and was being ratcheted ever tighter. 'But I am in love. With you!'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'Yes!' She heard the echoes of her argument with another man about her love for her husband. It had been bad enough with him, a stranger, but it was even worse with Valentin himself.

'You just believe you are, because you wanted to be. You liked the idea of being in love, of being a wife – but this is not a soul connection. The skies did not light up when we first met. We can both be honest about that, can't we?'

He stepped away, and she felt as if she might disintegrate without his grip.

'… But this works for us both. And when one day you too meet someone who ignites fires in your heart, no one will be more pleased for you than I! Our arrangement will never stand in the way of your happiness, I promise you that.'

'Arrangement?' she whispered. 'You're saying our marriage is … transactional? All for show?'

'Of course it is not so reductive as that.' He seemed exasperated by her. 'I am tremendously fond of you, *chérie*, really I am, and I believe no one will

have a better, stronger marriage than ours, because we see it for what it is. There is so much more to marriage than love.'

She stared at him, feeling hollowed out by his words. She had not thought it was possible to feel worse than she had when she had seen the lipstick; when she had heard Eva's confession about Beatrice … but somehow the floor kept dropping to new lows beneath her feet.

Seeing her devastation, he clasped her face in his hands and kissed her lightly on the lips. A rallying cry of sorts, pulling her back to herself. 'Come. Our guests will be arriving, and I need to speak to Otto on a matter first.' He crossed the room, erect and composed and looking like himself once more, like he always did coming out of meetings. He turned back at the door and smiled. 'You look beautiful, by the way. As always.'

She watched him slip away, leaving her alone with the inescapable truth. Her marriage was not the love story she had thought but a conflation of convenience, timing and optics. All day she had tried to understand where she had gone wrong but the truth was, she had simply never been right. She had never been *her*, the woman he really loved. And she never would be.

He would give her everything but his heart, and in return she would be his songbird, decorative and enchanting in her gilded cage.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lake Geneva
1 December 2026

‘You did not say that,’ Dulcie laughed, her fingers playing with the slender stem of the crystal glass.

‘I did,’ Hugh grinned. ‘And it worked too!’

‘Unbelievable!’

‘No word of a lie. In my experience, people hear what they want to hear.’

Dulcie sighed, shaking her head. ‘Well, in my industry, the stakes aren’t quite so high. We’ve never had anyone sue us. In fact, they tend to come back to us over and again. I think our retention rate is something like eighty-seven per cent? They become more like friends, really.’

‘I can believe it.’

He openly held her gaze, making no secret of his interest in becoming her friend. More than that. Tom cleared his throat, and Dulcie realized they had been monopolizing the conversation. The wine had gone to her head a little; she was feeling more relaxed than she had in weeks. She reached for the water bottle, but Alejandro got to it first.

He didn’t look at her as he refilled her glass.

‘Service isn’t up to scratch,’ Hugh murmured, looking around with a displeased expression. ‘They’re paid to do that.’

The restaurant was one of the best in the city and just a block down from Phillips, so they had been able to walk there. Dulcie had texted Georges, telling him not to worry about moving the car and reminding him to text her if he heard anything from home; Hugh had offered her his arm as they’d walked, her heels a hazard on the icy pavements. The windows were tinted here, the lights discreetly low. The walls were papered with bronze silk, the

chairs upholstered in black suede. Everything was quietly opulent, more for touch than show.

A waiter came over, realizing the oversight and refilling the glasses as Tom and Hugh began talking about the next day's sale.

Dulcie took the opportunity to excuse herself, eyes following her as she got up. She went to the ladies' room and checked her phone. Still no messages, no calls.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, feeling tipsy. Her cheeks were flushed but her eyes were bright and even she, always her own harshest critic, could see she looked good. A woman in her prime. She felt revitalized. Alive. Her old self. An evening of flirting had awoken her spirit again, making her realize how dulled it had become from sitting alone for days on end. The darkness had eclipsed her and slowed her own pulse. She was already in mourning, even as her grandmother's heart continued to beat.

It simply hadn't crossed her mind, as she had been getting ready to go out earlier, that the evening would spin into a night like this, but duty had become pleasure and she felt herself thrill to it. Because once she was back at the villa and the doors closed, she would be back to waiting again, listening to the ticking of the clock …

She walked back out—

'What … what are you doing?' she asked, finding Alejandro leaning against the wall, clearly waiting for her.

'I could ask you the same thing.'

'What?'

'Are you flirting with him to get back at me?'

'Why would I—?'

'At the studio the other day … I told you, she was a client.'

'It's really none of my business what she is.'

'No? Because you seemed bothered at the time. And you will hardly look at me tonight.'

'Well, perhaps I don't like being lied to.'

He arched an eyebrow at her accusation.

'We both know she's more than your client.'

'No.'

She sighed. 'I heard the way she called for you; I saw the way she was dressed. I saw the way she looked at me, like I was a rival.' She held her

hands up. ‘But as I said, it’s nothing to do with me if you’re having an affair with a married woman.’ She had seen the woman’s wedding ring as they had passed each other at the gate too; and she watched the surprise bloom on his face at how much she had discerned in a matter of moments.

He looked away for a moment, jaw pulsing as he was caught in the lie. ‘Fine, we had a thing going … But it’s never been anything serious, for obvious reasons. He’s away a lot, she gets lonely – and I’m single.’ He shrugged. ‘It was only ever a casual arrangement. No one’s getting hurt.’

‘Her husband might beg to differ.’

‘Well, that’s her lookout, not mine,’ he shrugged. ‘My conscience is clear. I’m a free agent.’

She rolled her eyes at his justifications and moved to go. ‘Right, well, whatever helps you sleep at night.’

He caught her lightly by the elbow, stopping her. ‘Look, this was all before I met you, anyway. I didn’t know she was going to turn up the other day, and nothing happened after you left. I asked her to go.’

He had? She felt weak to her stomach as his eyes bored into her, but she pushed it down. ‘… I didn’t ask you to do that.’

‘No, but I wanted to.’

‘Why?’ She stepped back from him, forcing him to relinquish his hold on her. ‘You don’t owe me anything. You were never going to see me again.’

‘But I was. I was always going to find you.’

‘How? You know nothing about me.’

‘I’ve got your number. Not to mention, I also know your grandmother’s house is on the lake and has a statue on the terrace.’

A bead of amusement glimmered in his eyes but she shot him a sceptical look, refusing to fold again. ‘It’s a big lake, Alé.’

‘And I’d have got a boat and sailed round till I found it,’ he smiled.

A silence beat between them as they stared at one another, the attraction pulling them both in once more.

His voice dropped lower and she saw his body language shift. ‘Why did you say no to dinner with me, but yes to him? You like him?’

She could hear the hurt flicker in his voice. ‘Alé, it’s not like that.’

‘No? You’ve been flirting with him all night.’

‘We’re just talking.’

‘That’s what you’re calling that little show out there? I’m not an idiot. If he’s the one you want, just say it. He’s my friend. I’m not going to mess

things up between us over a woman. Say you want him and I'll step aside.' He shrugged as if he couldn't care less, but his eyes were blazing and his mouth had flattened into a thin line. The man was stressed.

'Look, I wasn't lying when you asked me to dinner. I told you what I'm dealing with at the moment. I can't get into something with anyone right now.'

'And yet you're entertaining Hugh's attentions?'

As she had hoped, the conversation over dinner had turned to her job, and Hugh had briefly mentioned he had 'a place in Shropshire' that needed doing. He made no mention of four hundred acres of land nor the double-digit number of bedrooms, instead referring to it as a heap, a mess, a headache. Tom's ears had pricked up a couple of times across the table, but he had been chatting with Alejandro by then and Dulcie, keeping her voice low, had grasped the opportunity while she had it, smiling brightly as she carelessly tossed out thoughts and ideas.

She had to land the job, but she couldn't tell Alejandro that. As far as any of them here knew tonight, this meeting tonight was a happy accident and nothing more.

She tried to bring down the heat. 'Look, I'm just having a fun, light-hearted evening; my first in a very long time. It's not a crime.'

'You have to choose,' he insisted.

'I don't have to do anything.' She moved to step past him again, but he sidestepped in front of her.

'Are you going to go home with him tonight?'

'What?'

His eyes trained upon hers like sniper dots. 'You know exactly where this is heading. He's here for one night. He's going to ask you back … Are you going to say yes?'

She swallowed, knowing he had a point. Unless she explicitly told Hugh she wanted to pitch for the job, he would see her as a romantic prospect and not a professional one. But how could she declare that in front of Tom without opening up the field? She needed more time. Time alone with Hugh, but not too alone. She had to choose him – just not in the way Alejandro thought.

'I don't need to explain myself to you,' she said quietly, brushing past him. She walked back to the table, her heart beating fast as she took her seat. Tom and Hugh were still deep in discussion over the watch catalogue,

but Hugh's eyes fixed upon her as she sat back down. Did he wonder why she'd taken so long? Was Alejandro's absence suspicious?

She saw the bill had been settled during her departure.

'That was a wonderful meal, thank you,' she said to them both, although she sensed it was Hugh who had picked up the tab.

Alejandro returned to the table several minutes later, pocketing his phone as if he'd just been making a call.

'So who's up for a nightcap back at mine?' Hugh asked as they all rose. 'I'm in the Mandarin Oriental. They've upgraded me to a crazy suite. The views are insane.'

Tom held his hands up in polite decline. 'Kind offer, but I need to keep my head fresh for the bidding tomorrow.'

'You see through my sabotage tactics, clearly,' Hugh grinned, but not trying to dissuade him. 'Dulcie?'

She felt a hum of tension suddenly as the evening's intricate dance came to a sudden spinning stop. Alejandro had called it correctly. Everything between them had been building to this. They all knew what it meant if she said yes.

Tom was looking at the tablecloth, but Alejandro's stare was openly weighted upon her, as if daring her to say it. Would his friend triumph where he had failed?

'… I'm afraid I have to get back too. My poor driver's been stuck outside for hours. I'd told him I was only popping in to the party for half an hour at most.'

'It's his job,' Hugh shrugged. 'Hardly a matter of whether he minds.'

'Well … plus, he's eighty-one now, so his vision really isn't what it was. His wife doesn't like him driving late at night.'

'Your driver is eighty-one?' Hugh laughed. 'You're not serious?'

'He's worked for us for decades; he's more like family than an employee.'

Hugh looked baffled as he realized she was being perfectly serious. 'Well, then, tell him he can go—'

'Drop it! She has a family situation, Hugh,' Alejandro cut in. '… Remember I said earlier?'

His tone was sharp, and the two old friends looked at one another like stags about to lock antlers. Dulcie held her breath. If Hugh continued to

press her and force the issue, the entire night would be soured. All her groundwork here tonight would be undone.

‘But I’ll have one with you,’ Alejandro said more generously, stepping back from the confrontation first and giving him an opportunity to save face. ‘I mean, that was always the plan anyway, right? You and me.’

There was a brief pause.

‘Yes, of course.’ Hugh straightened his tie as the awkward moment was smoothed over. ‘Great.’

They exited the restaurant to find it was snowing hard.

‘Oh!’ Dulcie said, pulling her coat tightly as the wind ran at them. Snow was settling thickly on the parked cars. She hoped Georges had the engine running to keep himself warm.

‘Well, this is going to be interesting,’ Alejandro said, looking up into the white night sky. ‘A bit of furniture rearranging for me later, I think. My bed will have a snowdrift for a pillow when I get in.’

‘It can’t be that bad, surely?’ Hugh asked.

Alejandro just blew out his cheeks as he watched the snowflakes whirling ever downwards. ‘Try worse.’

‘But what about the room you saw earlier?’

‘Already gone by the time I got there.’

‘Then get a room at the Mandarin! I know it satisfies some hair-shirt instinct in you to piss off your father and play the part of the impov—’

‘I have to get back to the geese.’

Tom guffawed. ‘Geese?’

‘It’s a long story,’ Alejandro smiled.

‘For next time, then,’ Tom said generously, shaking their hands. ‘Dulcie, let’s have lunch when you’re back in London,’ he said, kissing her on the cheeks. ‘You don’t know when exactly you’ll be back?’

‘No, afraid not. But I’ll call you as soon as I am.’

‘Great.’

Alejandro air-kissed her goodbye without comment. Her rebuttal of Hugh’s offer had been the result he’d supposedly wanted, but he didn’t seem very happy about it. She wasn’t going home with either one of them.

Hugh stood in front of her. ‘Well, Dulcie, what an unexpected pleasure this has been.’

‘It has been great fun. Thanks again for dinner …’ She glanced down the street, seeing Tom walking off, out of earshot. It was the opportunity she

had been looking for to put things between them on a professional footing. ‘And I’ve loved hearing about your project in Shropshire. We’d love to throw our hats in the ring. Shall I get my partner, Quinn, to call you?’

‘I’d rather call you.’

‘Well, as I mentioned, I’m on indefinite compassionate leave at the moment. Besides Quinn is the real lead on the projects anyway.’

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. ‘But if I did give you the commission, *you’d* still be working on it, right?’

She swallowed. ‘Sure.’

‘So, then, this is not goodbye, Dulcie. Simply *adieu*.’

‘Then *adieu*,’ she smiled. She hadn’t extricated herself from him as fully as she had hoped, but Quinn Beaumont was now potentially the frontrunner for a job that might save her company; she couldn’t jeopardize it on account of saving the feelings – and pride – of a man she barely knew and didn’t trust. Even if he did make her stomach drop. ‘And good luck tomorrow with the bidding.’

‘I’ll be sure to hold my nerve, so as not to let you down.’

Alejandro rolled his eyes and started walking off down the street.

‘I’ll call you!’ Hugh called with a triumphant note, breaking into a casual jog after him.

Dulcie crossed the road, walking beneath the Christmas lights strung around the street lamps and up to where Georges was still parked. The windscreen was completely white, but to her relief he had the engine on, and it was warm inside when she slipped onto the back seat.

‘That must have been a successful evening,’ he said, putting the car into drive and pulling away.

‘Well, I achieved what I set out to do, so yes, I guess it was,’ she said, but her tone was muted. She felt suddenly flattened, her earlier high spirits fizzled out as she looked out of the window at the two old friends walking together. Hugh was talking animatedly, Alejandro listening with his gaze dead ahead, his hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched against the cold.

‘Your partner will be pleased?’ Georges asked, glancing at her in the rear-view mirror.

‘He will be, yeah,’ she said. Only one person wasn’t, but he didn’t count.

He didn’t.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paris
11 September 1962

It wasn’t brought up again. Everything had been said that needed to be said, and both Lise and Valentin were clear now on what this was. Valentin’s diary made more sense, at least, as she understood what was meant when ‘Run’ was blocked out in his diary for ninety minutes every other day.

For Valentin, her apparent acceptance of the situation seemed to have deepened his affection for her, as if he admired, or perhaps respected, her ability to transcend the base emotions of jealousy and possessiveness. Paradoxically, she saw more of him than ever and she realized that he had been avoiding her before, using his schedule as a screen. He became more real too, nuanced and flawed, no longer smothering his irritation beneath a benign smile but allowing himself to mutter, complain and curse. The husband she had truly wanted him to be was here, now they had established he was hers in name only.

Lise didn’t feel fully in her body in those first few weeks, even though she performed her duties with her usual grace. Only Sylvie noticed the change, expressing pity through small kindnesses that lay within her gift: a lie-in, coffee in bed. Eva called several times, but Lise still wasn’t ready to see her. If her friend wasn’t directly responsible for the fault line in her marriage, she had nonetheless been a bridge to Valentin’s mistress. Her loyalty to Lise had been partial at best.

Ironically, it was her loneliness that led her to ascend in her public role. Desperate to keep busy, she threw herself into hosting lunches for the heads of charities and the wives of benefactors; she started collaborating on a fundraising dinner with the actress Audrey Hepburn for the International

Red Cross. *Vogue* magazine even contacted her about a feature on the ‘powers behind the throne’, featuring the wives of France’s most influential men; Valentin made her turn it down, but just to have been asked was validation of her keen eye and exquisite taste. It was indubitably a golden prize in Parisian society, and she took some solace in this quiet revenge of outshining the woman who had refused to relinquish her hold on Lise’s husband.

Now, on this cool September evening, she walked around the embassy gardens, dwarfed by the bronze sculptures and feeling another sense of pride. That she had pulled this off was a huge coup: the sculptor Alberto Giacometti had won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale only two months previously and everyone wanted him. She had heard that the Tate, the Guggenheim and the Kunsthaus Zürich were all wooing him with offers of retrospectives, yet she had slipped under the curtain, beating them all to it.

She wouldn’t soon forget Valentin’s face when she had told him of her achievement. The sculptor had represented France in the Biennale but he was Swiss by birth, and he had appreciated the symmetry of her proposition to host a private exhibition at the Swiss embassy in Paris. Valentin had looked at her with such pride as she unveiled her plan, she’d thought it might actually be possible that he could love her after all. But he hadn’t missed his run that day, and she had felt the last shard of her glass heart finally splinter.

Invitations to the event had been highly sought after as soon as the news broke and Sylvie had been fielding calls all week as people asked, pleaded and finally begged for admission. Numbers were strictly limited; exclusivity was key, and Lise didn’t want the impact of the giant pieces to be lost because of a horde of bodies crushing around them. They needed space and perspective for their power to be felt. The highlight would of course be *Walking Man*, the prize-winning sculpture depicting a man in motion, attenuated limbs contrasted with clubbed feet and a shrunken head so that the human form was recognizable but distorted.

Her personal favourite was *Woman of Venice*. An especially tall statue, it depicted a bare-breasted woman, her hands clamped to her sides, legs pinned at the knees and ankles as if she were holding herself together. She looked composed, noble even, but utterly alone, as if waiting for the world to take a shot. Lise couldn’t take her eyes off her.

In the evening sun, the sculptures' shadows fell like huge steel blades across the lawn, only adding to the visual drama. From within the shadow of the beech tree, Lise took a moment to watch her guests mingling. Tonight was proving to be another sparkling success. Everyone there was in high spirits, delighted to have made the cut and dressed in their finery. Lise had chosen a dark bronze satin dress – as if she too were one of the pieces – and had felt the admiring looks upon her as she passed through, greeting everyone by name and making them all feel special while she felt nothing; she had learnt from her husband after all, the greatest pretender. She was the *belle du jour* and everyone wanted to be seen with her. Even the president and his wife, now recovered from the Clamart incident – a dramatic night for them all in the end, it had transpired – had promised to look in. Her company was golden; it was only her husband who didn't really care for it.

'So – how do you like the taste of power?'

She startled at the voice and turned to find Leo Santos standing beside her, holding two fresh coupes of champagne. He handed her one, as if they were friends.

But she remembered the last time she had seen him in Les Deux Magots. And the time before that, in the Palais de Tokyo … She had no idea what they were. They were strangers and yet intimates. 'I'm well aware my popularity is provisional.'

'Oh?'

'Every single person here is angling to get on the guest list for the ICRC event.'

'Not quite every person.'

She arched an eyebrow. 'You don't want to be in the same room as Audrey Hepburn?'

'Hollywood's not my thing. This, though …' He looked at the sculptures glinting in the flaming light of sunset. His eyes lingered, softening, on the dramatic silhouettes. 'It's impressive.'

'I'm glad you approve,' she said tartly. 'I seem to recall that the first time we met, I completely underwhelmed you with my artistic sensibilities.'

He looked back at her. 'It was your choice of husband I objected to.'

She stared at him, astonished by his directness still. 'You can't say things like that,' she said quietly, looking around to make sure no one had overheard; but everyone was choosing to stand in the sunshine.

'Why not? They're my feelings.'

‘But what gives you the right to express them?’

‘Being alive. Otherwise we’re spiritually dead, aren’t we?’

She looked away, exhaling sharply. She couldn’t have a conversation with him, of all people, tonight of all nights. She well remembered their conversation at the Palais de Tokyo, his unapologetic yearning for her still sitting like a golden nugget in her brain, tempting her, comforting her with the thought that someone out there wanted her. When she had seen him in the café that time, if he had come back for her …

But he hadn’t. He had walked past and not returned.

She watched the mingling throng with a dispassionate gaze. ‘So you know Picasso’s wife?’

It was his turn to be on the back foot. ‘A little.’

‘A little? It looked like you knew her quite well from where I was sitting.’

‘I’m a Spanish artist in Paris. She’s married to a Spanish artist in Paris. Is it so unlikely we should know each other?’

‘Yes. This is a big city. I mean, I don’t …’ She thought for a moment. ‘I don’t know Ursula Andress just because we’re both Swiss.’ She shrugged and looked back at him, seeing that a defensiveness had sprung up. His body language was usually open. Flagrantly so. But now …

She frowned. ‘What’s really going on? You didn’t look like you were just discussing the weather.’

He didn’t reply, staring instead at the party going on without them. Neither one of them missed.

She sighed. ‘And I thought you were a man with nothing to hide. A man of passion, who liked to call a spade a spade.’ Her words were a taunt.

She went to move away, but he stopped her. ‘Wait.’ The word was a whisper.

He glanced away for several moments, as if deliberating a problem, before looking back at her. ‘If I tell you something, you have to swear not to tell a soul …’ His piercing blue eyes narrowed. ‘I’m serious, Lise.’

She felt a shiver at his casual familiarity, feeling how the promise of a shared secret bound around them like ivy twines. ‘I wouldn’t share a confidence on principle,’ she said quietly. ‘But if it’s that serious, perhaps you shouldn’t be telling me.’

‘I want to show you I trust you.’ He held her gaze. ‘I’m prepared to take the risk, for you.’

Risk? She swallowed, wondering just what she'd stumbled upon. 'Okay.'

He was quiet for several moments, weighing his words before he spoke. 'I've been tasked by my boss, by Suarez, with getting him to agree to a retrospective. Back home.'

'Oh.' It wasn't at all what she'd been expecting him to say.

'Franco wants it. He's determined, in fact.'

'But … Picasso's very staunchly—'

'Communist, yes. He stands publicly against the regime. Hence the secrecy.'

'He won't go for it, surely?'

Santos shrugged. 'You'd be surprised. Whatever his political instincts, Spain is his home, and every artist wants to be celebrated in the land of his birth. Our talks so far have been … meaningful. His wife is on board with the idea too; she's been very helpful.' He watched Lise taking this all in, seeing how her mind was racing. 'I'm going back to Madrid soon to meet with the director of the Prado and discuss what terms can be offered.'

She felt a strange ripple of disquiet at the thought of him leaving Paris. 'How long will you be gone?'

A tiny light ignited in his eyes, as if he saw what she was trying to hide. He took a half-step closer. 'Only a few days. It will be the biggest coup of my career if I can convince Pablo to do it, but it's tough. I know the New York Met is chasing him hard too.'

She knew how that felt. Getting Giacometti to commit to this event, she had felt like David up against Goliath. There was no doubt that Franco's propaganda would spin it as communist capitulation to the fascist regime – something Picasso would be well aware of. Would he tether his legacy to identity or integrity? 'Then I hope you pull it off, Leo.'

Her use of his given name wasn't lost on him and he looked back at her intently. Did he sense the stress fracture that ran through the middle of her now? She was no longer the woman he had first met. The naive newlywed. The blushing bride. 'Now I've told you a secret, tell me one in return.'

She snapped her head away. 'No, that wasn't what I agreed to. You made me promise not to tell anyone.'

But he disregarded her point, his eyes fixed upon her profile. 'Why were you sitting there that day? Les Deux Magots is not your usual haunt.'

'How do you know it's not?'

‘Because you like the third table from the right, along the back row, at Café de Flore.’

She blinked. ‘… You’ve been following me?’

He didn’t deny it. ‘You haven’t been there lately.’

She caught her breath. ‘I’ve been busy. Clearly.’ She motioned to the garden scene.

‘… You looked upset. I was worried about you.’

Her eyes flashed as the hurt arrowed through her again and she whipped back around to face him. ‘But not enough that you came back.’ Accusation glinted off the words.

His hand reached for her as if by instinct, but he pulled it back in time. ‘I couldn’t.’

‘Couldn’t? Or couldn’t be bothered?’

‘Lise, if I could have, I would have.’ He didn’t move towards her, but from the look in his eyes and the way he said her name – like it was a pair of shoes he’d worn in – she felt as if he’d clutched her to him. For the first time in weeks, someone truly seemed to be seeing her. Where did it come from, this sense of a shared history between them?

She looked away again, knowing she couldn’t let her feelings show. He already seemed to see too much. Across the lawn, she caught sight of Valentin laughing with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and … and standing by his side, her beautiful auburn hair glinting in the light, was Beatrice. They were standing so close that their arms were almost touching. Lise recoiled at the sight of them together. She knew Sylvie had made sure Beatrice wasn’t on the guest list, one of the small kindnesses within her gift – which meant the only person who could have admitted her here was Valentin himself.

Lise absorbed the body blow of the betrayal as she watched her husband with his mistress. It was one thing to step aside for true love; it was quite another to have it rubbed in her face on the night that was supposed to be her triumph, her crowning glory. She was supposed to be the one standing by his side in the sun. Instead she felt like the Giacometti statue, wounded and alone in the crowd; holding herself together with fingertips, wishes and pride.

‘Lise,’ Leo whispered, standing closer to her now. ‘Lise, look at me.’

Slowly, she looked back at him and saw pity in his eyes. ‘… You know too?’

He swallowed, and she knew then that everybody did. Not just him, or Eva. Not just the women at the lunch.

Echoes swam through her mind of words that hadn't landed at the time. Wagstaff trawling for how well she knew her husband: *You didn't know he's a gambling man? … One should never trust a man too in control of himself. There has to be a pressure-release valve somewhere. Be grateful his is cards.*

It was an open secret, loosely kept by this gilded circle.

Her humiliation was complete. She gulped, feeling the horror of it all. 'That's why you felt enabled to say those things to me. I'm cast off,' she said, her voice hollow. 'Easy pickings.'

'No.' His voice was firm. 'You deserve better. I hate him for doing this to you.'

She felt the tears prick her eyes as she shook her head, rejecting his alliance. She was a laughing stock. Nothing was hers. Not even this.

'I can't … I can't do this,' she said, a sob rising in her throat and making her judder. She felt herself coming undone. 'I can't stay here.'

He held out his hand and waited for her to look back at him. 'Then don't.'

They left through a gate at the back. It was guarded by embassy security, so he went two minutes ahead of her, walking left down the street and disappearing out of sight. She emerged smoking a cigarette, walking idly in the opposite direction and in no apparent hurry. The policeman on duty merely nodded as she passed him; she was known for her walks by now. The party was in full swing, but her prerogative as hostess extended to being able to leave whenever she wished. There was no law against it.

Only when she got to the next corner and disappeared from his sight did she break into a light run. Leo had gone around the block and was waiting for her down the street. In silence, she followed him. She felt the pounding of her heart over the clip of her heels, moving quickly through the streets with no idea where they were heading, passing through shadows and light.

She didn't care. She let him lead, take her away to somewhere safer, where she was more than a motif. His hand clasped hers warmly; it felt so natural, and when her thumb rubbed against his skin – a subconscious action – he looked back at her with an expression that left her in no doubt of what was coming.

Somewhere in the Marais they stopped outside a dark green door and he pulled a key from his pocket, still not relinquishing his grip on her hand. They stepped into a narrow hall – stone floors; a marble-topped console table with letters on it; an umbrella stand – and he led her up the stairs to the fourth and top floor. The apartment, what she saw of it, had eaves, beamed ceilings, white walls with loose-leaf etchings tacked to them, thin striped curtains, a narrow brass bed …

They stopped in the middle of the room and he looked at her, giving her a last chance to retreat, ready for her to tell him this was a mistake, she was still married … But she saw the heat in his eyes, the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and as she unzipped her dress and took off her brassiere, standing before him bare-breasted, she saw how he caught his breath.

He made her feel more desired in a single action than Valentin ever had and she almost whimpered as he swooped in, lifting her and carrying her to the bed. It creaked under their weight as they kissed hungrily, their mutual need rising quickly as clothes were stripped, skin pressing to skin. His mouth covered her, his hands exploring, his entire being consuming her as if she were his life force. He took her with a passion she had never known, making her cry out, the sounds of their lovemaking drifting through the open windows and soaring above the city, forgetting all about the party in a walled garden that was somewhere down below, continuing on without them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lake Geneva
2 December 2026

‘Good morning, Mr Wagstaff.’

Dulcie’s guest looked up as she walked into the drawing room. He began to rise – an old-school instinct – but she stopped him. Ninety-year-old joints had to come before manners, surely?

‘I’m so sorry I didn’t get a chance to see you yesterday. It had been my intention to join you for tea, but I was waylaid by an unexpected work event. I hope you don’t think me rude.’

‘On the contrary, I was delighted, Miss Beaumont,’ he said as she sat in the armchair opposite him. The fire was already roaring, even at this early hour. Outside the snow was still coming down heavily, the landscape already muffled, sharp edges rounded and even the spiny silhouettes of winter trees becoming pillowy. ‘I am well aware that I have foisted myself upon you and my presence here is tolerated under duress. My intention is to remain well below radar until mission is accomplished.’

She regarded him with a cautious smile, still in the dark as to what his mission actually was and not forgetting that he had been caught ‘out of bounds’ yesterday afternoon. She wondered whether his charm would hold up when she told him tomorrow that he would need to leave, regardless of whether her grandmother had awoken or not. Manners, even his, could really only grease the wheel so far.

‘You know, you really must call me Dulcie,’ she said, crossing her legs. ‘Granny wouldn’t like for us not to be on friendly terms.’

‘Well, in that case, you must call me Wags. Or Tatty Wags.’

She laughed. ‘That’s a wonderful name.’

‘It has the benefit of being memorable, certainly. Was always rather useful in my line of work. So many new faces all the time, you can imagine …’

‘You must have lots of stories from your time in the diplomatic service.’

He gave an enigmatic smile. ‘Well, it would be a jolly poor show to have reached my age without some.’

She regarded him thoughtfully. In his tweed jacket and butter-yellow cashmere vest, he looked more like a professor than a diplomat. ‘Do you miss it?’

‘Oh, absolutely. We always used to say in the corps that the art of diplomacy is letting others have your way. I’m not sure I’ve had my own way since leaving.’

She laughed, just as Helda came in with a tray of fresh tea and still-warm cake. Like Georges the evening before, Dulcie sensed the housekeeper was pleased at having a reason to return to familiar duties. The villa had become more like a mausoleum than a family home in recent years; it was invigorating when tiny glimmers of life made their way in, like vines poking through the windows.

‘Oh, now, Madame Marchand,’ Wagstaff smiled, sitting straighter in his chair. ‘How will you ever get rid of me if you insist on feeding me with your fantastic cakes?’ He asked the question so sincerely, Dulcie had to smile as she watched Helda preen with pride. In spite of the housekeeper’s lingering reservations about their sit-in guest, she wasn’t wholly immune to his charm.

‘It’s important to keep your strength up, Monsieur Wagstaff. All this waiting is very draining,’ the housekeeper said, bustling out again, but with a pleased look.

‘I assume there’s no change with dear Lissy?’ he asked Dulcie.

‘No. Anna said she didn’t open her eyes at all yesterday.’

‘A mercy, possibly.’

‘For her, yes. It’s difficult for us, though. It feels like such a waste to have her here with us still, but … not.’ She sighed as she looked down blankly at her hands. ‘There are so many questions I still want to ask her, things I have to say. I wasted so much time being in London when I could have been here with her.’ She bit her lip.

‘I’m sure she would have wanted you living your life to the fullest. No one had a more exciting or glamorous life than your grandmother. At least,

not when I knew her – I can't speak to her later years. Sadly, we lost touch.'

'That's a shame.'

'Yes; entirely my fault, though. I was married to my job back then.'

'What did you do exactly?' Dulcie asked, leaning forward and carefully slicing the cake.

'I was at the British embassy when Valentin was Swiss ambassador to France. We worked closely on a lot of matters at the time. Very charming man; excellent at his job, of course. One doesn't get to his rank without being possessed of superior gifts.'

'I've heard a lot of wonderful things about my grandfather. I wish I could have met him, but even my mother never had that. He died before she was born.'

She placed a slice of cake onto a plate and set it down on the table before him. She knew she would have to choose her words carefully, sensing from their previous encounters that he wouldn't respond to bluntness. Her grandmother had always said diplomats were skilled in the 'art of evasion'; he was like the knight on the chessboard, always moving obliquely, and she too would need to come at things from an angle.

He nodded, looking pensive. '… It was a tragedy, Valentin dying so young. He was a fair bit older than Lise, but she was devoted to him. It was a terrible loss.'

She opened her mouth to ask how exactly her grandfather had died – now that she had realized she didn't know, it seemed important to find out – but Wagstaff had already moved on.

'Did I mention that I've visited here once before?'

'Only in passing. Was it for one of Granny's parties?'

'It was for your mother's christening. She was just a babe in arms, of course.'

'Oh.' She stirred the tea in the pot, gauging the colour.

He smiled, sinking into a memory. 'I brought her a teddy bear, I recall. Not the most inspired gift, I grant you, but it was very soft. Mohair, I think,' he said thoughtfully. 'What I lacked in imagination, I always made up for in extravagance …'

Dulcie's head whipped up, and he looked back at her with a start as she got to her feet. 'Did I say somethi—?'

'Wait. I'll be right back.'

She darted from the room, running up the stairs two at a time and coming back down again in under a minute. Wagstaff was still looking bewildered when she burst back into the room, holding a teddy bear – and a box.

'Was it this one?' she asked, panting from her exertions.

Wagstaff took the toy, handling it with an amazed expression. It was threadbare in places, the ribbon around its neck faded to a dusty barely-pink. 'But … yes!'

Dulcie gasped with delight at having found another connection to her family's past. 'Molly, Mummy called her. She took her everywhere, even when she moved to London.'

'She's been well loved, I can tell. I am tremendously touched that my humble gift has become an heirloom.' He looked almost emotional. She suspected it was a rare occurrence. He belonged to another generation – the stiff-upper-lip brigade, Granny had always said. 'And she gave her to you?'

Dulcie's smile faltered as she sat back down again. 'Well, after my parents' accident, she became mine, along with everything else. But Molly mattered most because she was something I could love, knowing Mummy had loved her too.'

Wagstaff regarded her. '… Accident?' He asked the question tentatively, as if sensing the tragedy held within the word, and she realized he hadn't known she'd been orphaned.

'A drunk driver. They died when I was twelve.'

'Dear God, I am sorry. To have lost your parents so young – that's a terrible thing.'

She hesitated, feeling a sudden wellspring of emotion rise up in her under his kind gaze. It had been so many years, she could usually talk about it with a precise sense of remove. 'Well, I was lucky to have Granny.'

'She was luckier still to have you.'

Dulcie swallowed. She had often wondered which of them had had it worse – her, losing her only mother? Or her grandmother, losing her only child?

She looked back at him. With her mother gone, there was so little that was tangible from her past; but here was the person who had given her mother her most cherished possession. Not only that, he had known her grandmother as a young woman – before she'd become a mother and a grandmother. 'Could I show you something else, too?'

'Of course.'

She got up and placed the box of photographs on the ottoman between them. Helda had put it back in her room, no doubt at Anna's behest. The nurse liked a tidy space.

'They're just some assorted photographs, but seeing as you've been here before, at the house, I wondered whether any of them might look familiar to you?'

'Well, I doubt I can be of very much help. I only came here the one time,' he said, reaching for his reading glasses and perching them on the end of his nose as he picked up the topmost bunch. 'But I will certainly take a look. It's not as if I haven't the time.'

'They mainly show a whole lot of nothing,' Dulcie sighed. 'I keep going through them, trying to identify people and places, but without much luck. There's just one photo in there that is clearly our terrace, but the rest …' She rifled through, quickly finding the photo she meant and handing it over. 'You see the view? It's exactly ours. And there's the statue of Diana, which is still here – although no balloons tied to her hands anymore.'

'What a pity! Life is always better with balloons.'

She smiled. 'Yes.'

'Hmm, actually …' He stared at the photograph intently. 'I seem to recall balloons at your mother's christening.'

'You do?' Dulcie felt her pulse quicken. Another link.

'But perhaps Lissy always put balloons out at parties, I don't know. She had a great sense of whimsy.'

'Mm, I'm not sure balloons would make the cut for her usual parties. They were always such sophisticated affairs and balloons aren't really … elegant.'

'You're right, of course,' he agreed. 'It must have been a child's event.'

He looked at the next pictures in his hands: snow-topped mountains. Sunlight on ripples on the lake. A yacht in full sail.

'Some of them have a date written on the back,' she said, turning one over to show '1963' written in pencil. 'They're all from that same year – the ones that are dated, anyway. That's the year my mother was born. I think that was when Granny came back here. That's around the time you knew her?'

'Yes, thereabouts – but in Paris, not once she moved back here.' He looked at her apologetically as he carried on shuffling through the

photographs. ‘I’m sorry; I’m not sure what I can add. I wish I could offer some insight, but we largely lost touch once she came home.’

Dulcie sank back into her armchair, reaching for her tea. It was growing cold. ‘I know; don’t worry, I didn’t really have any entrenched hope they’d mean anything to you. It was just on the off chance there was something, or someone, you recognized … It would be nice to learn even just one more story about her life.’

He nodded, and she knew he understood the unspoken thought: before it was too late.

She sipped her tea as he continued looking through with an interested squint. He was easy company, content with silence and just the flickering of a fire.

‘They’re making me quite nostalgic,’ he murmured. ‘There’s something about the quality of the light. Digital images just don’t capture the essence of a thing in the same w—’

He stopped suddenly.

‘What is it?’ she asked, leaning forward and catching a glimpse of the photograph he was holding: a splayed hand setting off a domed cocktail ring. Perfume bottles and a powder puff sat in the background, arranged on a dressing table – but not the one in her grandmother’s bedroom upstairs. It occurred to her that it was different to the other photographs, which were largely taken outdoors and naturalistic in theme. ‘Do you recognize that?’

He paused. ‘No … No,’ he said after a moment. ‘But she did always love interesting jewellery. I hope she kept it for your mother and you—’

There was a knock at the door and Helda came back in. ‘Sorry to interrupt.’ She looked at Dulcie. ‘But Anna’s calling for you on the monitor.’

Dulcie gasped, setting down her tea. ‘She’s awake?’

‘Seems so.’

Dulcie jumped up. ‘Mr Wagstaff … Wags …’ she smiled, holding a hand to stop him as she saw him starting to move too. ‘Let me check first to see how she’s feeling and whether she’s up to seeing anyone. As I said the other night, that’s not often the case. It can be very distressing for us, but mainly for her, and the last thing anyone wants to do is frighten – or embarrass – her.’

‘But—’

‘I’ll come back down and let you know how she is as soon as I can. I promise.’ She left the room at a brisk clip, running up the stairs and along the corridor to the master bedroom.

The door was ajar, and Anna looked up as she came in.

Dulcie braced. Would it be rage or fear today? There was a pause as the dice rolled and she looked over. Her grandmother was lying in the bed, her eyes open, blinking slowly.

‘Dulcie.’ The word came out as a breath, like a dove being released into the dusk. One hand reached weakly across the covers towards her. ‘Sweet child! What are you doing here?’

Her voice was weak, but her accent was still crisply correct. She hadn’t lost her refined edges; it was only the middle that was muddled. Dulcie wondered what awareness her grandmother had – if any – of the weeks preceding this in which she had existed in a fugue, her body anchored to this bed, untethered from her own mind.

For a moment, Dulcie couldn’t react. ‘… You know my name?’ she whispered, stepping closer to the bed. Anna vacated the chair for her, walking around to the other side and taking her grandmother’s pulse as they talked.

‘What a funny thing to say.’

Dulcie froze, her eyes sliding over to Anna, who was also holding her breath. The nurse nodded, encouraging her. These moments of clarity were fleeting, sometimes only seconds long, like the sun peeping between clouds.

‘… I came to see you. I was missing you.’ She didn’t want to say anything that might alert her grandmother to the seriousness of her condition and frighten her.

Her grandmother smiled, appling her cheeks. Even now, she was still beautiful: fine-boned and delicate, her pale grey eyes rimmed with a black pencil line of dark lashes. Her once-tawny hair had long ago turned white and was kept cut in a bob for practicality’s sake, but it suited her. Everything did. She had been a woman who could pull off any look, any style. ‘All the way from London to see me? I must be scintillating company.’

Dulcie caught her breath at the faint humour. It was almost inconceivable. Every visit over the past eighteen months – and Dulcie had come regularly, every six weeks – had been notable for its disappointments. But to be recognized, to joke …

‘Help me up,’ her grandmother said to the nurse, lifting her head slightly from the pillow. Dulcie stepped back and watched as Anna carefully levered her up a fraction, repositioning the bedding so that she was sitting more upright.

There was a small silence as the old lady looked around the dimly lit space, like a traveller returned home. It was clear the room belonged to a glamorous woman. Its colours were bold and yet spare: a hand-printed wallpaper decorated with duck-egg-blue birds on umber-and-chocolate florals. It was a restrained design, Swedish in feel, and peeling now in some of the upper corners. The four-poster was dressed with an ochre jumbo gingham and antique-lace-trimmed pillows, now lined up against the wall; hatboxes, at least a dozen, were still stacked atop the armoires; an old fur coat hung in its cloth bag on the back of the door; and on every surface were black-and-white photographs in silver frames, a story attached to each one.

But then there was the medical equipment revealing another truth: that this room belonged to a sick woman. One who was dying.

Shadows passed over her face.

The nurse moved with quiet efficiency, bringing a straw to her patient’s lips so that she could take some water, counting the pulse at her wrist as she sipped.

‘How are you feeling, madame?’ Anna asked.

‘Perfectly fine. Why, don’t I look it?’

A small smile came into Anna’s eyes at the attitude. ‘You look very well. I’m just going to take your temperature.’ She placed a thermometer in her ear and waited until it beeped.

‘Happy?’

‘Happy,’ Anna replied.

Dulcie’s grandmother sank back into the pillows again and regarded Dulcie with a clear-sightedness that immediately made her want to cry. Being seen again by the only person left in this world who loved her made her realize just how alone she had felt all these months. She dropped her head so that her grandmother couldn’t see her tears shining in the lamplight.

‘When did you get back? Has school broken up?’

There it was. Her lucidity was incomplete, but it was better than nothing. ‘Yes. Yes. We’re off now for Christmas.’ After her parents’ deaths, she had

gone to a boarding school in Wiltshire; but this had been her home during the holidays.

Her grandmother smiled. ‘Good, I’m glad. Tell me all your news. I’m terribly … out of touch.’

‘Well, I … broke up with Jake, that boyfriend you didn’t like.’

They had broken up over seven years ago, during her A levels, but she tried to meet her grandmother where she was. If she couldn’t stay in the present, she nonetheless had great faculty for revisiting the past. A look of disapproval flickered across the wizened face. ‘A scoundrel. Once a cheat, always a cheat.’

‘Yes. You were right about him.’ She had been.

‘What’s the name of the new one?’ Her grandmother’s eyes twinkled with recognition, knowing there was always a new one.

‘Alé.’ She said it on instinct, feeling the gratification of saying his name and allowing herself to think about him for a moment. Where was the harm? It was a little white lie, a fanciful daydream, something with which to entertain her grandmother. She didn’t want to lose this rare moment of connection to something as mundane as the truth.

‘Tell me about him.’

His face drifted through her mind’s eye, as clear as day. She could conjure him at will, fully formed in her imagination. He seemed to have taken root like a weed blown in on the wind. ‘Well, he’s different from the others … Direct. Straightforward.’

‘Straightforward is good. That’s the sign it’s something real; when there are no games.’ Her grandmother patted her hand. ‘So, why do you look sad?’

Did she? She felt caught off guard by the observation, as if something inside her – a protective membrane – had given way. It had been so long since she’d felt the watchful gaze of a mother, a grandmother. ‘Because I probably won’t see him again now.’ She remembered how it had felt watching him walk into the night with Hugh. If he had to choose between the two of them, he would choose his old friend. And so would she.

‘Why not?’

‘… There’s no reason to.’

‘Look at me, *chérie*.’

Dulcie lifted her gaze to meet her grandmother’s eyes. They were like a September day: sunshine and clouds.

‘What matters is that your worlds collided at all. If the universe brought you together in the first place, that’s your reason.’

Dulcie considered her words. She had met Alejandro twice by accident and once by design. If destiny was on her side, she had also given fate a helping hand. ‘I’m not sure that will be enough.’

‘Let me tell you something.’ Her grandmother’s voice was breathy. ‘When I met the love of my life, he knew immediately, before I did. But there were no games, even though I was married to someone else.’ She nodded as she saw Dulcie’s surprise. ‘Yes, I know … A scandal … But he told me how he felt, and then he waited and let me come to him. Choosing him was the simplest decision of my life.’

Dulcie’s smile stalled at the revelation; she was completely thrown by the casual admission. Her grandmother – who believed in three kisses, thank-you notes, white gloves and pearls by day – was admitting to an affair? Not just an affair, but a *coup de foudre*?

Surely it was a mistake? Another of her confusions? She looked over at Anna hovering in the background, keeping an eye, as ever; but the nurse could only shrug back. She could no sooner differentiate a secret from a misremembered memory than Dulcie.

Dulcie pressed her cheek to her grandmother’s hand, reaching for some kind of connection. She wanted a truth she could hold onto, but she didn’t dare push … what if this was the last they ever had? She felt panic beating around the edges of the interaction, terrified the wrong response might bring it to an end.

‘Tell me about your boy.’

Dulcie’s head dropped. ‘So, his name’s Alejandro. He’s Spanish.’

Her grandmother made a sound, a deep sigh that seemed to travel from her soul. ‘Spanish … Always the most beautiful eyes.’

‘Yes.’ He did have beautiful eyes: glittering with amusement, clouded with hurt, they had pulled her in from the very first moment. She found it hard to look away from them. ‘He’s an artist.’

‘From l’Hermitage.’

Dulcie’s head whipped up. It was the name of the old chapel site where Alejandro had his studio. ‘Yes … How did you know that?’ She squeezed her grandmother’s hand. ‘Mémé, how did you know?’

But her grandmother didn’t reply; her gaze had become fixed upon Dulcie, as if she had fallen inside herself.

Anna stepped forward, watching closely as she saw the shift too.

Her grandmother frowned as she looked at Dulcie. '… Sylvie?'

'Granny, no, it's me. Dulcie … Your granddaughter?'

'… Where's Sylvie?'

'She's …' Dulcie felt her stomach drop, knowing the clouds had come back in, except perhaps that wasn't the right metaphor because they didn't drift; clarity came like lightning bolts. Just sharp flashes in a dark sky, here and then gone again. She had no idea who Sylvie was. 'She's downstairs, I think.'

Her grandmother gasped. 'The baby! She needs her feed.'

'The baby' had been fifty-one years of age when she'd died, twelve years ago now. '… Don't worry, she's sleeping. She'll wake up when she's hungry.'

'Yes.' Her grandmother smiled, staring at the far wall, not noticing as Anna held her wrist and took her pulse, throwing a look of caution in Dulcie's direction.

'We should let her rest,' the nurse murmured, but a sound – the creaking of a floorboard – made her look up, and she stiffened. 'Excuse me … You need to leave!'

Dulcie spun round and felt a sudden burst of anger as she saw Tatton Wagstaff already crossing the room.

'Mr Wagstaff!' she gasped, jumping up as he headed straight for the patient. 'I think I was clear when I—'

'Wags.' Her grandmother smiled, brightening, raising a withered arm towards him. 'Are we having lunch? Oh, don't tell me I've forgotten?'

Dulcie fell back from her indignation as she saw how her grandmother relaxed at the sight of him. She looked at Anna, watching too with a guarded, hostile look. Neither of them moved, as if frozen to the spot in attack mode.

'You've forgotten nothing. I said I'd come to you, remember?' he said, not missing a beat as he walked straight to the tiny figure on the bed and stooped down to kiss the back of her hand. 'You look beautiful today, as ever.'

'Oh, stop,' her grandmother said girlishly. 'You're too much. My hair's a fright. I need to speak to Sylvie.' A shadow flickered over her face. '… I don't know where she's got to.'

‘I just passed her,’ Wagstaff said, jerking his head in the direction of the corridor. ‘She said she had a meeting.’

She sighed. ‘Valentin works her too hard. They’re forever in meetings. How will she ever find a husband if all she does is work all the time?’

‘You’re right, of course. We shall have to set her up with one of my juniors. Handsome fellows.’

‘You always snaffle the most handsome ones!’

‘Guilty as charged,’ he smiled with a devilish look.

Dulcie’s eyes slid over to Anna’s in surprise. Neither of them could have predicted this.

Her grandmother grasped Wagstaff’s fingers a little more tightly. ‘Tell me – where are you taking me for lunch?’

He smiled. ‘Our favourite.’

‘Café de Flore?’

‘Naturally. And you know it’s truffle season.’

‘I love truffles!’

‘I know you do, so I rang ahead to make sure they’d have them in.’

‘You always think of the little things.’

‘Well now, don’t I always say the devil is in the detail?’ He patted her hand as he perched on the edge of the bed. ‘And I’ve just been having a lovely conversation with your enchanting granddaughter.’

Her grandmother blinked. ‘Who?’

Dulcie felt like she’d been slapped.

‘Sylvie, I mean,’ he replied, not missing a beat. ‘With Sylvie. We were just reminiscing over old times.’

‘Oh, we had fun, didn’t we?’ her grandmother sighed, a brightness in her eyes that was growing slightly too bright. She smiled suddenly, a carousel of memories rotating behind her eyes. ‘… Do you remember that time we had to stop that duel that was shaping up during the ball?’

‘The duel?’ Wagstaff looked thoughtful. ‘Remind me …’

‘Oh, you remember! I forget why they fell out, but the Romanian ambassador took umbrage at something one of the Italians said. Probably over a woman or a tariff, I can’t recall … Anyway, it was very dramatic and Continental. It took all Valentin’s considerable powers of persuasion to talk them down and come back in for the waltz.’

‘I do remember that now,’ Wagstaff agreed. ‘Good old Valentin!’

Dulcie listened with interest. She knew her grandmother had known everyone back in the day. Borders had been irrelevant. In the diplomatic world, everywhere was home and everyone a friend, or a friend yet to be made. The six degrees of separation hadn't applied; her grandmother had only ever been one degree removed from anyone of note.

'And then we went to the party where the crown princess drank so much champagne, she ended up wandering off and going for a swim in the lake, in her satin and jewels, and had to be rescued by the gardeners.'

'One of my favourites!' Wagstaff replied, but with a smile and laugh Dulcie could see he was having to force. She didn't think he remembered the story at all, but it was kind of him, she supposed, to pretend otherwise and keep the jollity going.

'Yes – they had to form a human chain with their forks jabbed into the bank to hold them. Her gown weighed as much as a car as they were hauling her out! And she swore blind she left a sapphire ring behind in the water. She made such a fuss they had to send in a diver to have a look but of course, it was long gone. If it ever had been there. She said Queen Victoria had given it to her father's mother—' Her eyes narrowed, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. 'But who could really say for sure?'

'Indeed. I was never convinced about the ring,' he agreed. 'She was a pathological fibber if you ask me.'

'Wags, you're dreadful,' her grandmother giggled.

Dulcie leaned in, wanting to be part of the conversation, even if it made no sense to her. 'And these stories never made the press?' she asked.

'Absolutely not!' her grandmother exclaimed, looking aghast.

'Discretion was a point of honour in those days,' Wagstaff replied. 'Not like now, all these show-and-tells.'

'Disgraceful,' her grandmother muttered as a frown came onto her face, then faded away, the train of thought eluding her. She had gone again, slipped inside a jumble of fragmented memories that floated in her broken mind like glitter in a snow globe.

Her eyes closed and Wagstaff sat back, regarding her grandmother with a benign smile, recognizing too that the moment had gone. Dulcie watched him, still angry at his intrusion. He had had no right coming in here like this: even if her grandmother hadn't been alarmed by his presence, even if it had actually soothed her, this was still a private time for family only. Her time.

And besides, out of everything they'd just said, it was all nonsense and trivia. He hadn't conveyed this apparently urgent message of his.

Anna stepped in. 'I must ask you to leave now,' she said briskly. 'She needs to rest.'

Wagstaff nodded and looked at Dulcie with a small smile, seemingly unaware of his transgression; unapologetic for what he had just done. 'Oh well.' He gave a hapless shrug, oblivious to her displeasure. 'We go again tomorrow.'

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Paris
21 September 1962

Lise ran through the rain, holding her mackintosh above her head as she hopped over puddles and skipped around the tourists walking too slowly. Taxis and scooters rushed past, water sluicing off the wheels and splashing her ankles, but she didn't care, gasping with laughter as she went.

Leo was waiting for her, that was all that mattered. She would find him in room 17 on the first floor of the Musée Rodin. 'Why there?' she had asked.

'Because it's quietest. Everyone else is looking at *The Kiss*.'

But she had meant – why in public? She wanted them to be alone. No eyes on them, their hands on each other. It had been five days since she had last seen him and it felt like a month. Sylvie had started blocking out ninety-minute interludes in Lise's diary as she had asked, noting them down as 'Walk', but Leo had been away for a few days on his trip back to Madrid and they had been deprived of a rendezvous. She was owed him. He had become her right and she his.

No one seemed to query the uptick in her demeanour. The buzz for the Red Cross gala would have been enough to invigorate anyone, and she was excelling in her duties as the ambassador's wife. She was ever the consummate hostess, increasingly skilled now in learning the daily biographies of her guests, her political knowledge becoming an intricately patterned spiderweb in which she could skilfully connect point to point across the geopolitical spectrum. Her eyes no longer followed Valentin around the room, and her bedroom door was always closed … They had never been happier. Her husband had been right, the night she had

confronted him about Beatrice. Love wasn't the bedrock of a good marriage.

The night of the Giacometti party, her absence had been officially passed off – to those who enquired – as a sudden, short illness; besides, enough people had seen her beforehand to believe she was simply elsewhere to them at any given time. Valentin, perhaps aware of his own risky behaviour in flaunting his mistress before not just her, but the president himself, wasn't so brazen as to point a finger. But she knew he knew. The policeman at the back gate had seen her leave the party, albeit alone; he had logged it, and Otto or Sylvie would have reported it back to Valentin when her disappearance had become apparent to them. Upon her return the next morning, he had simply asked her if she intended to stay. She had said yes, and it hadn't been discussed since.

She paid for her ticket into the museum and shook the droplets off her coat, smoothing back her hair as she started up the stairs. She could feel the moisture on her face, the heat from her own cheeks in anticipation of seeing him again.

She walked through to the oval room in the far right corner of the museum, seeing at once why he had chosen this space in particular. She smiled at the messaging. *The Walking Man* dominated the room, a large, life-size bronze of a male figure, no arms or head, but defined musculature through the torso and powerful legs striding out. It was an opposite to Giacometti's contemplative and melancholic *Walking Man* figure, which had been their beginning. He was showing her their strength now.

She looked around the room for him, searching for the mop of silky dark hair her fingers already knew so well, the distinctive crook of the neck where she would gasp for air … But he wasn't here. She was ahead of him, for once. She wandered idly as she waited, her body restless. On the walls were displays of plaster heads; in glass cabinets, fragments of casts, ancient urns …

Outside, the cloudburst continued its rampage, rain like bullets against the French doors. She stood by the glass and looked down at the formal lawns, parterres stretching down towards the circle pond at the end. At the height of summer the flowerbeds frothed with deep banks of pure white hydrangeas, but now, as they slid into autumn, the blooms had fallen, leaves turning copper and curling on the boughs. The gardens were casting off into their winter garb and the only colours she could see came from the host of

umbrellas moving along the paths towards *The Thinker*, set off to the left from where she stood.

There she saw him, no umbrella. He was almost out of range, but her eye could find him in any crowd, and her whole body reacted as she recognized the deep planes of his handsome face. She couldn't understand now how she had rejected him that day at the Palais, when he had laid it all out on the line for her: a straightforward proposal to be with him, the man who wanted her. How had she turned her back on him? Even though the memory of it had lingered in her mind for weeks afterwards, she had remained resolute, wedded to her vows. But now when she closed her eyes, his was the face she saw moving above her, blue eyes limpid, kiss-crushed lips. He had become her obsession.

He was standing in the rain, caught talking to someone, though she couldn't see who. He looked like he wanted to get away, tension in his body, his gaze moving towards the building every few moments. She could see his spirit was restless too, trying to get to her.

She felt a stab of frustration at the hold-up. Who was it, getting in their way? She tried to see but they were obscured from her view here by the large, grand pyramid-shaped yews that bordered the iconic sculpture. She walked along the row of windows, fingers on the glass, her gaze fixed to the scene below, unable to lift her eyes off Leo, willing him to come to her. Her body ached for him, her spirit yearned … Every minute lost to them was a torture. She still couldn't see around the trees, so she walked through into the next room of masterpieces.

Then the next one.

Then the next one, until she was in the other oval room in the farthest corner of the museum. There was nowhere left to go—

'Lise? … I thought it was you!'

She jumped, so startled by the mention of her own name that she had to press her hand to her chest as if to stop her heart from leaping out. 'Oh!' she gasped, collapsing with relief as she saw who it was. 'Oh, it's only you, Wags.'

He let a beat pass. 'Yes. Thank heavens.'

She laughed, realizing her rudeness – not to mention overreaction. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for that to come out the way it sounded!'

'Quite all right. It's the typical response, I find.'

She smiled. His self-deprecation always smoothed everything over. She gave another sigh of relief, composing herself as the immediate panic subsided, but realizing she wasn't out of the woods yet. If he were to see Leo here … the coincidence would be too great for all three of them to be here at once. Not to mention if Leo saw her before he saw Wagstaff; if he came rushing over like a lover … 'What are you doing here?' she asked mildly. It was noon, on a weekday. Shouldn't he be at the embassy?

'Oh.' He looked momentarily awkward, and Lise was surprised to realize he was on the back foot too. 'Dare I say, indulging myself.'

'Indulging yourself?' She was intrigued.

'I …' He tipped his head slightly, as if acknowledging his embarrassment. 'I like to come here when I need to cogitate.'

'Cogitate,' she echoed.

'Yes. There's a particular piece that always seems to scratch the itch.'

'I see.' She watched him, seeing his evident discomfort. '… May I ask which piece?'

'Only if you promise this stays between us?' He raised a wry eyebrow. Nothing was ever too serious with him.

She placed a finger to her lips and smiled.

'Very well. But I am entrusting you with upholding my fearsome reputation.'

She followed him across the corridor into the next salon, where he stopped in front of *La Cathédrale*. Lise knew it, of course: the iconic sculpture of two right hands, wrists interlinked, fingertips barely touching. The hands were gently cupped, soft and yielding.

'Hm. Churchill paints to help him manage the pressures of work; I stare at hands,' he murmured in a sombre tone. 'You can see how bad it would look for me if this were to get out.'

She giggled. 'Indeed. Your days as Tatton the Terrible would be over.'

Even he smiled at that. He relaxed, pushing his hands into his trouser pockets as he contemplated it. 'I can't explain why I like it. There's just something about the holding of space that speaks to me. I find I get all my best thinking done here.'

'Well, it's a masterpiece for a reason,' Lise shrugged, regarding it too. 'It's supposed to make you think. And feel. It is incredibly moving.'

They both admired it for several moments more, Lise walking around it slowly to see it through three hundred and sixty degrees. It was perfect from

any angle.

He watched as she peered closer. ‘And you? Are you here alone? Don’t let me monopol—’

‘No, no. I’m quite alone.’ She thought fast as she straightened up, hating that she had to lie to his face when he had never been anything but friendly and welcoming to her. ‘I came in to see *The Walking Man*. After the Giacometti exhibition—’

‘Oh, brava, by the way! Superlative show.’

‘Thank you. I was very pleased with it.’

‘I’m sorry we didn’t really get a chance to talk that evening.’ She could see him thinking back; was he only now noticing her prolonged absence?

‘No, I’m sorry. I was the hostess. It was just one of those nights. So many people to get around—’

‘Well, you always make it look so easy.’

‘You’re very kind, Wags.’ She tucked her hair behind her ear, aware of their comedy of manners.

‘Anyway, I rudely interrupted you. You were saying about *The Walking Man* …?’

‘Oh yes. Well, after working closely with Alberto’s *Walking Man*, I thought I’d have another look at this rendition. See how it landed by comparison. They’re very different, of course. Variations on a theme.’

‘I’m not sure I know it,’ he frowned. ‘Shall we go tog—’

‘Actually, I’ve just come from seeing it, and there’s a school group in there,’ she said quickly. Surely Leo would have come inside by now? He’d be waiting in there for her, wondering where she was. Would he think she’d left because he was late? Or that she hadn’t come at all? She felt sick at the thought of either prospect. ‘I think they’re just sheltering from the rain, but they’re really quite rowdy.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘But I was about to have a better look at the *Danaid*. Do you know that one?’

‘The story, yes. My Classics master at school drilled us in the Greeks.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Although the less said about that the better. Can’t say I know Rodin’s take, though.’

‘Yes, I’m less acquainted with his marbles too. Something I need to rectify. It’s downstairs, I believe.’

‘Why, then let’s have a look!’

She steeled herself as they walked through the museum together, Wagstaff chatting easily as they went. There was only one staircase up and

down, only one way in and out, and Lise's eyes anxiously scanned every room they walked through.

They turned into the staircase hall. It was a spectacular double-height atrium with a winding stone staircase and elaborate trellised balustrade, looking down upon an imposing black-and-white-marble-flagged floor. Voices carried loftily, exclamations echoing as people fell in, shaking their umbrellas and seeking refuge from the rain.

She looked down, seeing Leo coming through in that very moment on the heels of a group of nuns. She caught her breath in horror as he looked up, his hand freezing mid-motion as he raked back his wet hair and caught sight of her descending with Tatton Wagstaff. He was soaked through, his dark hair slick, rain still dewy on his skin. He looked more handsome than she'd ever seen him, the water like gloss applied to an oil painting, bringing out colour, tone and lustre.

Her eyes widened at him in silent warning and he read the situation immediately. Calmly, with no sudden movements to catch the eye, he continued walking through, bowing his head and disappearing discreetly behind one of the Corinthian columns in the hall. The crisis appeared and dissipated in all of five seconds.

Lise glanced at Wagstaff. He appeared not to have noticed, waxing lyrically about an orchestral performance at the Madeleine the previous night, not missing a beat. Seconds later, they passed right in front of the same column on their way to see the *Danaid*.

She relaxed finally, knowing they were safe now and Leo could make his escape, their rendezvous aborted. But it had been far too close. They had been moments away from discovery, and the clatter of her heart made one thing very clear: she wasn't made for secrets and lies.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lake Geneva
3 December 2026

Alejandro looked stunned by the sight of Dulcie in his doorway. She saw the question in his eyes: *What are you doing here?* But it wasn't what he asked her.

'… How do you keep getting past the geese?'

'It appears they have all the protective instincts of broccoli.'

'Broccoli?'

She shrugged.

Alejandro, sitting at his workbench, gave a weary sigh. 'Well, clearly I need to train them to protect me better,' he muttered as she stepped fully into the studio and shut the door behind her. '… Come in, by the way.'

She ignored his sarcasm. 'What do you need protecting from, anyway?'

'You mean, besides women who flirt with my best friend?'

'You're not still sore about that,' she said, walking over and noticing immediately that the bed was now fully pushed into the middle of the space, several feet away from the walls. Overhead, the blue tarp continued to fight with the wind.

He didn't reply, watching her warily as though she in some way represented a threat. 'I suppose you'd like a coffee.'

'Thank you. Black. No sugar.'

He got up, crossing over to the kitchenette and filling the kettle as she wandered around the bench, peering at his work. It looked to her more like a science lab, with powders in pots and metal clamps everywhere.

'What is this?' she asked, touching one of them.

He glanced over. ‘It’s called an armature. It’s the base that takes the weight of the clay. Like a skeleton.’

‘Ah.’ She peered at the abstract form. ‘What’s it going to be when it’s done?’

He shrugged. ‘I’ll probably be the last to know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I just trust the process. See where it leads me.’

‘Does stuff ever not turn out the way you want?’

‘All the time.’

‘Are you working on putting together an exhibition at the moment?’

He shot her another look. ‘So many questions today.’

‘Just being polite.’

She waited in pointed silence for the kettle to boil, watching him pour the coffee. He handed her the cup then sat down again at his stool, a foot away from her. He was wearing a variation of what he’d been wearing the other day: jeans and boots, his leather tooling apron, a thick navy jumper with the sleeves pushed up to keep his arms clear. They were streaked with clay, a nasty-looking burn along the inside edge of his left forearm. He had a smudge of clay along his cheek too, and she felt an urge – instinct – to rub it away with her thumb, but she didn’t dare go near him. Even at this distance, she felt the tension humming between them like a force field; she’d get sucked in if she got too close.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked her.

‘I was worried about you.’

He gave a small snort, shaking his head and staring at a distant point on the far wall. She saw his jaw ball. ‘Look, you chose Cecil. It’s fine. I’m over it,’ he said coolly. ‘I don’t need welfare checks.’

She was taken aback. ‘Actually, I was going to say I was worried about you sleeping here with no roof … But good to know we have your blessing.’

There was a tight pause.

‘Right … Sorry.’

She shrugged, not sure what to say now. She was doing her best to be nonchalant, but it had hurt hearing him dismiss her like that. Was he over it?

She sipped her coffee, already regretting this. It had been a mistake giving in to the instinct to see him again. She had allowed her grandmother’s words to get into her head.

She searched for a safer topic of conversation. '… Did he get the watch?'

'Of course,' he said, seeming surprised by the question. 'Hugh always gets what he wants.'

His eyes were glinting with hidden anger.

She sighed. 'Alé, you do remember I didn't go back to his hotel for the nightcap, right? That was you. I went home.'

'But next time, when he calls?'

'Who says he's going to call?' It had been two days since the dinner and she'd heard nothing from him. Quinn was as jumpy as a flea in a basket of kittens. Had she played it wrong after all? Had turning down that nightcap come at a greater cost than she had realized?

He stared at her with a bleak expression. 'Dulcie, he's going to call.'

She looked away. 'Well, then, if it's a nightcap he wants, my answer will still be the same. I keep telling you – nothing has changed in my personal circumstances.'

'No?' His fingers tapped lightly on the side of his coffee cup. For the first time since she'd arrived, he didn't sound as hostile. 'There's no improvement?'

'No. And there won't be any. Her nurse says she's in the active dying phase now. Her body is shutting down, so …'

There was a pause. 'I'm sorry.'

She looked down, shrugged. 'So am I.'

'You're close to her?'

'… She's the only family I have left.'

'Really?' He sounded shocked.

'Who would lie about that?'

'God, that's rough.'

She could see he meant it. 'Yeah.'

'How are you doing with it?'

'Not great. It's so hard because … it feels like the end is so imminent but then, the days keep going by … And on the one hand, I want it to stay like that, because I don't want her to go. But then on the other—' Her voice trailed off.

'You feel guilty because you want your life back.'

She glanced at him. He got it. 'Something like that. And it makes me feel like a monster.'

'You're not a monster, Dulcie.'

She heard the softening in his voice and she gave a sudden smile, trying to lighten the mood. She hadn't come over here to bring him down with her tales of woe. 'We actually had a really good interlude with her yesterday. She woke up properly for the first time in a couple of days and was lucid … For a bit, anyway. Then it went off again, but she actually knew who I was for a few minutes.'

She knew now that it wasn't the good news it had seemed. Anna had explained to her afterwards that her grandmother's surprise burst of energy and brief clarity was typical of a phenomenon known as 'the surge' or 'terminal lucidity', in which a patient experienced an almost euphoric return to self before fading fast. The end had begun.

'Did you show her the photograph?'

'Photograph …?' She looked at him blankly, then winced, remembering the black-and-white view over the terrace. 'Oh, no … I forgot all about it. I was so surprised she knew my name, it completely left my mind.'

'Next time, then.'

Big *if*. 'Yeah.' She took another sip of coffee, remembering something. 'Funny thing, though – she knew this place!'

'Here?' He looked surprised.

'Yes, I mentioned—' She stopped, realizing a fraction too late that she had just unwittingly exposed herself.

'What? What did you mention?'

'Well, I said I'd met a sculptor and that he was Spanish, and she said you must be at l'Hermitage.'

His eyebrows lifted, a devilish look coming into his eyes. 'So you were talking about me to your grandmother?'

'No—'

But it was hopeless. He knew that in what might be one of their last ever conversations, Dulcie had told her grandmother about him. She hesitated. 'I mean, I was just telling her about my week.'

He grinned, that cocky look that she had scarcely seen since their first encounter back on his face again. Did he see a chink of light in her armour? It made her stomach flip. 'Right. Yeah. That's what it was – your week … So did you tell her about Hugh too, then?'

She gave an embarrassed laugh, knowing she'd been caught out. 'I mean, I would have done, if I had been able to get that far!'

But he wasn't buying it as he gave her a look that robbed her of all composure. A moment pulsed between them. 'Why have you come over here, Dulcie?'

Her heart rate switched up to a gallop. 'I told you, I was worried about your roof situation.'

'Yeah? And what can you do about it? Don't tell me you've got secret roofing talents?'

She laughed again, beginning to pick at a piece of lint on her coat.

'Actually, there's an empty flat above our garage. It's nothing fancy, but it's self-contained and weathertight at least.' She saw the way his eyes roamed her face as she spoke. 'And there's space downstairs where you could work too.' The entire end quarter of the garage wasn't being used – it could serve as a temporary workshop.

There was a long pause as he watched her. She swallowed hard, knowing this was a lot to take on board; an overly generous offer for someone she had met only a few times.

'I'm saying you can move in there, Alé, if you want. Just until your roof gets fixed.'

Still, he didn't reply immediately. They had met all of four times: twice by accident, twice by design, and of each of those two 'engineered' meetings, she had instigated both. Now she was offering him a bed. If she wouldn't let him near her, she couldn't seem to let him go either.

Was what she had come to offer a kindness, or a kind of madness? Because how could she stay away from him if he was going to be across—?

'… Is that yours?'

A phone was ringing.

Her phone.

She jumped for it. Usually Helda or Anna texted; a phone call suggested urgency. Oh God, was this it, the moment she had been dreading? She was only a seven-minute drive away, but still—

'Yes?' she asked, putting down her coffee, her hand clutching at her throat as she glanced at the door, ready to run.

'Dulcie? Miss Dulcie Beaumont?'

She stopped as she heard Hugh Cecil's assured voice. She looked over at Alejandro, who was watching with concern.

'Hi!' Her voice rose into a strange falsetto and she saw his expression change into bewilderment. She turned away, crossing to the far side of the

space. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m great. But I only have a second. They’re about to go into the speeches, so I’ll get straight to it if you don’t mind—’

‘Sure, no, go ahead.’ She closed her eyes, willing him to say the words: *The job’s yours. Make my house a home.*

‘Do you ski?’

What? Her eyes opened. ‘Yes—’

‘Ski well?’

‘… Yes, of course, but—’

‘Of course! Excellent! In which case, can you join me for a day on the slopes tomorrow? I’m flying back to Hong Kong but with all the powder up there right now, I’m stopping in Geneva for the day and red-eyeing back tomorrow night.’

She was taken aback by the unexpected offer. ‘Oh, look, I’m sorry, that’s an incredible invitation, but I really can’t—’

‘Be away from your grandmother? I know. Alé told me all about your family situation—’

He had? She spun on her heel and looked back at him. He blinked, oblivious and curious at once.

‘—But we’ve got a helicopter for the day. We’ll only be on Mont Blanc, so if you need to get back down quickly, we can get you back within fifteen minutes … I assume you’d have somewhere we could land?’

She was flabbergasted. ‘I mean, yes, but—’

‘Great! So, then, we’re on?’

‘Uh—’ She looked back at Alejandro, watching her closely.

A silence stretched out.

Hugh cleared his throat, reminding her he was there. ‘Also, I’ve been putting some further thought into my house project. Thought we could go over some initial ideas over an Aperol.’

It was the clincher and he knew it. She closed her eyes, knowing she had to do what she could to land this deal. It was her money on the line for that shop lease, and there was nothing else substantial on the horizon for Quinn Beaumont. Not yet. They’d got lucky finding out this job was even up for grabs, and now Hugh Cecil was offering to helicopter her on and off Mont Blanc. He was the proverbial gift horse.

‘Sure. That sounds amazing.’

‘Excellent! I’ll meet you at the heliport at ten tomorrow, okay?’

‘Ok—’

‘Can’t wait to see you again, Dulcie. It’ll be fun.’

He clicked off, leaving her staring at the phone in her hand.

Alejandro blinked as he waited, but how could she tell him what had just transpired? He had predicted exactly this – *he’s going to call* – and yet …

She swallowed, walking back over to him. ‘Well,’ she began. ‘That was, uh, to do with work.’

‘Didn’t sound like a work call.’

‘My work often doesn’t feel like work,’ she murmured, running a hand through her hair. She wanted to tell him the truth – that it had been Hugh, and they were going skiing tomorrow, but that she was only going so she could secure the job. Men closed deals on the golf course and shooting fields all the time. This was no different. He might just as easily have called up Tom and proposed the same offer: a day’s skiing and talking shop over lunch … But she knew Alejandro wouldn’t see it that way. Because Hugh didn’t see it that way. The lines were still blurred in spite of her best efforts. She had to continue to tread carefully to get that contract.

‘So, going back to your offer …’ he said, moving on. Taking her at her word. ‘Do you really mean it?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then I gladly accept. Thank you.’ He smiled at her and she felt the tension quiver between them, giving her the answer to the question going round and round in her mind: it was a kind of madness, not kindness. This offer wasn’t coming from the goodness of her heart, nor a cool head.

His phone beeped with a text and he glanced at it, frowning slightly as he read before turning it over again quickly.

‘I’ve got my car, if you want me to help you bring your bags?’

He looked back at her, running a hand through his hair. ‘Uh, to be honest, I’ll be fine working here in the days. Transporting everything over would be a pain – I’d need a van – and I can deal with the cold when I’m moving about. Plus, I have to come back for the geese anyway – feed them, put them away at night. But in terms of a warm bed … would it work if I moved in tomorrow evening?’

She was surprised. The snowdrifts on the floor suggested rather more urgency. ‘Really? Not tonight?’

He hesitated, his gaze flickering again towards the phone in his hand. A small tell? ‘I’ll be fine for another night. I need to get some things sorted

here first.’

He smiled, but she discerned a small shift in the mood, as if something had come between them even as she stood here. Who was that who had texted him?

‘Okay,’ she shrugged. ‘Well, give me your phone …’ She held out a hand.

‘What?’

‘Your phone … I’ll type in the address?’

‘Oh, the address. Right.’

She waited as he unlocked it and opened up his contacts; he handed it over with a rueful smile. He had her saved as Beautiful Girl Christie’s. She glanced at him, somehow both insulted and flattered at once.

‘I didn’t think I’d see you again,’ he said bashfully. ‘But I’ll update it. Right after this.’

Still, her fingers hovered uncertainly over the screen for a moment before she began entering the address to Villa Mirelle. Had she acted in haste, coming here, extending this offer? ‘I’ve, uh, got some errands to run tomorrow, so I’ll be in and out all day,’ she mumbled. ‘But just come over whenever suits. I’ll make sure it’s ready for you, so you don’t need to call ahead.’

She handed back the phone.

‘Thanks,’ he said, with one of those smiles that messed with her.

A moment pulsed in which she wasn’t sure what else to say now her message had been delivered, and she looked away, unable to hold his gaze. If she stayed here, only one thing would happen … And yet she remembered his shiftiness with his phone just now, the way he’d tried to hide the screen from her. The message that had just come in. Another offer of a bed tonight?

‘I’ll see you tomorrow, then.’ She stepped back and away, heading for the door.

‘Dulcie,’ he called.

‘Yeah?’

‘… You’re sure about this?’ He was looking at her quizzically.

Was she? The closeness she had felt when talking with him about her grandmother just a few minutes before, that sense of propulsion back into his orbit after being separated by Hugh, had stalled again. Her little white lie about a work call; his shiftiness around that text, his evasion about his

plans tonight … She realized that for all their chemistry, she really didn’t know him at all. Nor he, her.

They were just strangers on first-name terms. Soon to be sharing an address.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Paris
24 September 1962

‘Where are you?’ Lise looked up at him, her finger twirling the hair on his chest. Leo was staring out of the eaves window, over the grey rooftops. A ginger cat was treading over the tiles, its tail curved aloft as it easily navigated the ridge.

The sounds of Marie Laforêt filled the tiny apartment. ‘La Plage’ had become ‘their’ song, conjuring heady feelings of summers in St Tropez: steamy Mediterranean nights and languid days. His hands were folded behind his head, the sheet draped over his hips as they lay intertwined on the mattress, although they’d made love everywhere but the bed. Their passion was insatiable and she was coming over every day now, the key he’d had cut for her hidden in the inner zip purse of her bag. What had started with a sense of order, diarized restraint, had already fallen into chaos. The thwarted rendezvous at the Rodin museum a few days earlier had scared them both – not just with the possibility that they might be found out, but that they might be stopped. Leo had been badly spooked by the near miss with Wagstaff and was adamant there could be no more public dates; they had been fools to think this city was big enough to hide in, its narrow, meandering streets giving cover to stolen kisses. If *cinq à sept* was culturally ingrained in the Parisian lifestyle to which they were both visitors, it was still veiled with discretion. An affair was only elegant so long as it was discreet; to be careless about one’s bedroom secrets was vulgar, and that was unforgivable. They couldn’t be like the student lovers openly lying in the grass, their heads on each other’s laps, or the newlyweds embracing on the banks of the Seine; but this lack of oxygen they were

granted only made them gasp the harder. Every minute that wasn't spent together felt like a waste.

She lifted her arm and traced his jaw. Dark stubble was coming in. 'You seem so far away,' she whispered.

He looked down at her, and she saw the change in his eyes as she became the object of his focus. He smiled. 'I'm exactly where I want to be.'

'But you're thinking about something.'

'No.'

She wasn't convinced. He looked troubled. She could already read him. 'Someone, then?'

'Only you. Us … This. I hate that we have to hide.'

She tried to imagine it, living here together openly – no gilding, no staff; just staying in bed on Sundays, walking through the *brocantes*, sharing cigarettes and wine at Les Deux Magots, at one of the front-line tables where everyone could see them.

So what if people knew the truth? So what if she and Valentin divorced? Wouldn't it be a mercy for them both? Already she didn't know how her husband could bear it, living without the woman he loved, enduring her marriage to another man … Leo wasn't like him. She felt his jealousy whenever she mentioned Valentin's name. She felt his possessiveness of her every time he touched her – and she loved it. She wanted to be consumed by him, devoured whole. His and his alone.

Her marriage was on borrowed time, that much was already clear; but would Valentin let her go? He needed a wife for appearances; his role demanded it. But this situation was untenable. She knew she would have to confront him sooner or later.

'Now where have you gone?'

She looked up to find him watching her. She smiled. 'I was just daydreaming.'

'About?'

'Us.'

'Yes? Tell me.' He shifted position onto his side, his eyes falling hungrily to her naked form. He lifted her arm and began lightly covering it with kisses, slowly working his way up to her shoulder and the crook of her neck. 'What are we doing in these daydreams?' he asked, nuzzling her.

She closed her eyes. 'Well, I was thinking about—'

The doorbell buzzed from downstairs, but he didn't stop his caresses.

‘… Are you expecting someone?’ she whispered.

He shook his head, grinning at her excess of caution, whispering behind a closed door on the top floor. ‘It will be for one of the neighbours,’ he murmured, going back to kissing her, undeterred from his mission. ‘You were saying …’

She closed her eyes again. ‘Well, I was thinking how nice it would be to __’

It came again, more insistent, a finger pressed to the buzzer without pause. This time Leo pulled away with a sigh, throwing back the sheet and walking across the room. He leaned out of the window and shouted down to the street. ‘*Que carajo quieres?*’

Lise admired his body. He was athletically built, his olive skin darkly tanned, a deep line at his waist and mid-thigh revealing paler, private flesh that was for her eyes only. She didn’t hear the reply, but Leo came back into the room, reaching for his trousers on the chair and pulling them on.

‘Who is it?’ she asked, propping herself up on her elbows and watching as he hurriedly buttoned his fly.

‘Some papers from the embassy. I’ll only be a moment.’ He grabbed his shirt and shot his arms through, buttoning up quickly and stuffing his feet into his shoes. ‘Don’t go anywhere.’ A knowing smirk settled on his lips as if he knew she was addicted to him, that she could no sooner walk out the door than throw herself out of that window.

She watched him dart from the room, her body already primed for his return. She saw the cigarettes on his night table and she reached for them. Lighting up, she bunched the sheet around her body and went and stood by the window.

She loved the view from here, the narrow, medieval buildings all crammed together in a shoulder jostle, the trees in the Place du Marché-Sainte-Catherine visible from down the end of this side street. Opposite, downstairs, was a bistro, painted absinthe green and always busy, but especially at night, when voices from the tables would rise up in shouts and froths of laughter. She liked lying in bed with him, their bodies intertwined, and listening to the sounds of all those different lives – feeling a part of it all, interconnected, like a knot in a web of lace.

She exhaled and watched the cigarette smoke curl and loosen into nothingness as she looked around at the windows of his neighbours, but she could see nothing past the glass. She had never met any of them. Had they

seen her, letting herself in, leaving hours later with her hair down and matted, with bright eyes? She wondered how much they knew about Leo. Did they think him ‘just’ an artist, or did they know about his elevated status as cultural attaché at the Spanish embassy?

She heard muted voices, men’s, coming from below, but the window was set back from the ridge where the roof met the wall; she couldn’t see directly down, only to the middle of the road and the far side of the street.

She waited for the door slam, smiling when it finally came and taking a last drag on the cigarette. She ground out the stub and – on a whim, in the way she had seen him do – flicked it into the air. It felt transgressive. Free.

She watched it arc and fall down to the street below just as a man came into view, crossing the road and reaching into the pockets of his trench coat. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes. It was black, as was the cigarette he stopped to light as he reached the pavement. Lise watched, recognizing the sweetness of the first drag, the anticipatory hunch of the shoulders, the tilt back of the head on the first exhale … And something else too.

The apartment door opened and Leo came back in. He set down a brown envelope on the table. ‘I’m sorry—’ he said, stopping short as he saw her standing by the window.

Several moments pulsed in silence, both of them wondering the same thing: What had she just seen?

‘Lise—’ He came towards her but she held up a hand, beginning to tremble.

‘What’s going on, Leo?’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, but she heard the change in his voice. It was split with alarm.

‘Why was he here? Why are you meeting with him?’ There was no reason she could think of as to why Leo should even be talking to him. She frowned as she put a hand to her temple. It just didn’t make sense.

‘Lise, who? I told you, it was someone from the embassy.’

‘But not your embassy!’ she cried. ‘What’s … what’s going on?’

He held his hands up, trying to calm her; to talk her back down from this rising crescendo of panic. ‘Look, I don’t know what you think you saw, but —’

‘I know what I saw! I know who I saw!’

He let a beat pass, but he looked stricken. ‘Who did you see?’

They stared at one another.

She swallowed. ‘The Russian … Sergei Markov.’

He inhaled sharply, and suddenly it wasn’t her lover standing before her. His expression changed. She watched as his mind raced through alibis and lies. He wasn’t who she thought, and that meant … Oh God, who was he?

Her eyes went to the door behind him, but he was standing in the path, blocking her escape. She clutched the sheet tighter to her body.

‘I have to go.’

‘No.’ The firmness of the word made her quail. ‘No. We have to talk.’

‘I can’t stay here. I don’t know who you are,’ she said, moving to the far side of the bed and reaching for her clothes.

‘Yes, you do. I’m the man you love. I’m exactly who you think I am – but for one thing.’

She looked up, seeing him again in his eyes, pleading with her.

‘… Can I trust you?’

‘Why would you ask me that?’ she whispered.

His hands flew to his head, fingers interlocking as he squeezed his elbows together, taking a moment as he began to pace. He turned back to her, looking defeated. And frightened, she realized.

‘They know. About us.’

Her eyes widened. ‘The Russians?’

He nodded.

She slumped forward, her hands on the bed as the blood pooled in her feet. For several seconds, the room swam, dizziness surging and retreating like a tide as she tried to catch her breath.

Finally she looked up at him. ‘How?’ she whispered. ‘We were careful!’ They had left the Giacometti party separately, only ever met here. It made no sense …

‘I don’t know. I’ve been over and over it and all I can think is they must have started speculatively following either me or you this summer – and at some point, they discovered us.’

‘No,’ she rasped, shaking her head. She felt sick. Had they really been exposed by chance? Sheer bad luck? Or had there been a trigger? Her mind raced, thinking back.

‘Markov was there the night we met …’ she murmured. ‘Could he have …?’ But she dismissed the idea, remembering his scorn. ‘No, we argued. We didn’t even like each other. He couldn’t have known from that—’

Leo went very still. ‘Unless …’

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless he saw my anger for what it was … Jealousy.’ He turned away, tipping his face to the ceiling, his chest rising and falling as he breathed deeply, trying to stay calm.

Was that it? Had his passion, cloaked as antipathy, sowed a seed of curiosity just strong enough that he was trailed?

‘The Sargent exhibition?’ If they had been seen together there, even if just by accident …

Had he led them to her? Had they both been watched? She felt a cold chill at the thought of someone only ever a few steps behind on her walks across the city, her lunches and fitting appointments; sitting at Café de Flore with Eva; hiding out at Les Deux Magots – oh God, the day she had discovered Valentin’s affair and come undone; her key slotting into the door downstairs all these past weeks …

‘Maybe, I’m not sure. But he made the first approach at the Rodin,’ Leo said. ‘He stopped me outside in the gardens. He knew I was meeting you there.’

Lise’s eyes rose slowly to his as she straightened up, her blood growing waxy in her veins. She remembered it well – him talking to someone just out of her sightline. She had passed through the rooms trying to get a better vantage, only to run into Tatton Wagstaff instead. In her desperation to keep the Englishman from seeing her lover, she had forgotten all about Leo’s conversation outside. His paranoia about them being seen together had grown exponentially afterwards but she had thought it was the near miss with Wags that had spooked him, never once thinking …

‘What did he say to you?’

‘He threatened to expose us.’

Bile rose in her throat. ‘He’d tell Valentin?’

‘Worse.’

She blinked. What could be worse than—

‘He said he’d leak it to *Le Monde*.’

She stared at him in horror. The implications were obvious. Valentin’s work with the American lawyer on the Bay of Pigs hostages situation was sensitive and highly delicate. If it came out that his wife was having an affair with a junior member of the Spanish embassy, it would be not just embarrassing – he could be thrown off the negotiating table. He might even lose his position as ambassador altogether. Security and confidentiality

were the very cornerstones of diplomacy, and pillow talk was a threat to both.

‘But why would he do that? What possible benefit could there be for him to destroy Valentin’s career?’

‘It’s not about destroying Valentin. It’s about controlling us.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Leo’s mouth was set in a grim line. ‘It’s blackmail, Lise, plain and simple. There’s only one way we can buy his silence – we trade him keeping our secret for getting him another.’ He looked at her, then away. ‘There’s something he wants from Valentin’s office,’ he mumbled, his eyes on the floor.

‘You mean, spy for him?’ she whispered.

‘It would be a one-time thing,’ he said quickly. ‘He promised me that.’

‘And you believed him?’ she cried. ‘You think he’s a man of honour?’

He heard her scorn. ‘I have to take him at his word, Lise. I have no choice.’

‘There is a choice! You tell him no! We’ll …’ Her mind began to race now, looking for exits. ‘We’ll call his bluff. Get ahead of him! Our affair can’t hurt Valentin if I’ve already left him. He can distance himself from us, no harm, no foul to his career. I don’t care if all of Paris calls me a scarlet woman! We can leave here and start afresh somewhere.’

‘Lise—’

‘All that matters is we’re together, Leo. My marriage is already over. It never even began—’

‘Lise—’

She jumped up from the bed, looking for her clothes, reaching for her brassiere. ‘I’ll go to Valentin right now and tell him everything. I’ll ask for a divorce—’

‘Lise!’

She stopped, startled by his tone. He had never raised his voice at her before.

‘I already told him all that,’ Leo said in a low voice. ‘Markov said if I refuse him, he’ll tell the BPS I’m a Soviet mole.’

‘… But that’s a lie,’ she whispered.

‘Yes. But it’s a lie I can’t disprove. They’ll plant evidence, make it look like I’m what they say I am.’

She felt as if the air had been punched out of her. Franco's secret police force was notorious for its use of torture to crush political dissent. For Markov to 'out' Leo as a communist in the fascist government, a traitor inside the Spanish embassy itself … It would be tantamount to a death sentence.

Her stomach twisted into a hard knot. There really was no way out from this. They were trapped.

She sank onto the bed, finding no comfort in its softness, her eyes dull as slowly she looked back at him. '… What is it you have to do?'

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lake Geneva
4 December 2026

Georges kept the engine running as they waited in the helipad car park. The sky was a crisp blue and another overnight dump of powder had brought the snowline well down into the trees on the slopes across the lake. Dulcie felt overheated in her ski kit and unzipped the jacket, her leg jigging as she looked out of the window. When they had been out for dinner with Tom Gifford the other night, she had wanted to be alone with Hugh, but not too alone, and she wasn't sure where this sat on that scale: skiing Mont Blanc in broad daylight was hardly a darkened hotel room, and yet she still felt nervous.

Just ahead of them, another black Mercedes pulled up and she watched as Hugh emerged from the limo, sleek in all-navy Prada. He managed to look rich, athletic and incognito all at once. A man, also in ski kit, approached and they bumped fists, talking easily and with familiarity. Their guide for the day?

She watched as Hugh cast a look around the car park, unaware she was in the back of the anonymous black Mercedes, his eyes skimming unknowingly over Georges. The driver of the limo had got out and was handing a pair of skis to the guide as Hugh checked his phone. No doubt checking for a message from her.

'Time to go,' she said, inhaling nervously.

'Let me know when you're heading back,' Georges said over his shoulder. 'I'll be here to meet you.'

'Thanks, Georges. And obviously if there's any change at all—'

'I know. I'll call if she so much as moves.'

‘And keep a close eye on our guest. No more free-range excursions.’ She still couldn’t get a handle on her feelings for Wagstaff. On the one hand he was the perfect gentleman, charm personified; but on the other, he breached boundaries, albeit with a smile. There was something about him that pushed … like a spirit on the hand on the Ouija board. Guiding? Or manipulating? Until she knew what he had come to tell her grandmother, she couldn’t trust him.

‘I think Helda’s going to put a chair outside the drawing room and sit there till you come back,’ he chuckled.

‘I just don’t want Granny getting any shocks or surprises. I need to be sure she’s in the right frame of mind first.’

‘Don’t worry. Between me, Helda and Anna, your grandmother is more closely guarded than the crown jewels.’

She nodded and Georges got out first, opening her door for her as always. He was much slower moving around these days, but he took great offence to being robbed of his duty if she tried to exit unassisted.

‘Thank you,’ she said as he slowly slid her skis out from the special hatch that opened up in the centre console between the two back seats, through to the boot. ‘Wish me luck.’

‘You don’t need it – but good luck.’

She walked over, carrying her skis on her shoulder and her dangling helmet by the chin straps. ‘Hey,’ she called.

The men looked over as she approached, Hugh breaking out into a huge smile.

‘You’re here!’ he called, sounding pleased. ‘I didn’t realize that was your car. Ah – and that’s your driver, the one who’s part of the family.’ He nodded, giving Georges a small wave as he caught sight of the old chauffeur shuffling back to the driver’s door, seeming reassured that her alibi from the other night checked out.

The guide took the skis from her, loading them onto the helicopter a hundred yards away. She could see the pilot running through his checks and a knot of excitement tightened in her stomach. She had been skiing since she could walk. It was one of her greatest loves.

‘A fine day for it!’ she smiled as Hugh greeted her with a kiss on both cheeks, as if they were old friends already and not in fact meeting for the second time.

‘You see how I couldn’t pass up the opportunity?’

‘Indeed. How was the wedding?’ He had told her over dinner last week about coming back for his younger sister’s nuptials. This had only been the civil ceremony; there was a bigger bash for five hundred guests planned for the summer – but he was harbouring some doubts about the groom’s good character after hearing ‘some tales’ at the stag do.

‘Passed without a hitch. Now just the next fifty years to go, making sure he doesn’t put a foot out of line.’ He mimed holding a shotgun up to his shoulder, an eye closed as he peered down the barrel.

‘You’re the last of the romantics, I see,’ she grinned, feeling the wind gust. She pulled on the zip of her jacket, closing it to under her chin.

‘When it comes to my sisters, I admit I’m a little protective.’

‘I think it’s sweet. I’ve always wished I had a brother … Oh.’ Her hair had become tangled in the zipper.

‘Here, allow me,’ he said, bending down so that his face was level with hers as he worked to free her. He winced as he tried not to hurt her. ‘… There,’ he said finally.

She went to thank him but the sound of a car approaching caught their attention, his gaze lifting off her.

‘Ah. The cavalry!’

The who?

Dulcie turned as an Uber pulled up almost beside them. She watched as the rear doors opened and two figures emerged.

‘Better late than never!’ Hugh cawed as Alejandro slowly straightened up. He was dressed in unbranded black kit, his companion sleek and curvaceous in a navy all-in-one with a red-and-cream racing stripe down the sides. Immediately Dulcie regretted throwing on her mismatched Arc’teryx shell kit; it was several years old but she kept it at the villa here, not bothered about having the latest styles. She just wanted to be warm and dry when she skied, but now that felt like a colossal oversight.

She could see from the way Alejandro froze in his tracks that this reunion was just as much a surprise to him as to her. ‘Hey,’ she managed to say as he stared at her standing closely with Hugh. ‘I – I didn’t know you were coming too.’

There was a pause. ‘Likewise,’ he said coldly.

Hugh grinned, looking pleased with himself. ‘My little surprise. I’d paid for the seats in the chopper, so I thought the more the merrier …’ His eyes

slid to the woman clutching Alejandro's arm. 'Talking of …' He looked at his friend expectantly, awaiting an introduction. '… Mate?'

'Uh, this is Martina. Martina – Hugh and Dulcie,' Alejandro said as they all shook hands.

'Hey,' Martina smiled coolly, looking their host up and down. She was a beauty even beneath the full face of make-up, mid-thirties at a guess; certainly older than Alejandro. Dulcie recognized her straight away as the brunette from the studio gate, but she showed no sign of recognizing Dulcie back.

'Welcome. It's great you could join us, Martina. I apologize for the short notice,' Hugh said.

'Oh, I was at a loose end,' she shrugged. Her voice was low and slightly gravelled, as if she gargled martinis every morning. 'Besides, I'm always happy to get a call from this one.' She pressed a hand to Alejandro's chest, making no effort to hide her enormous engagement and wedding rings. 'He's not exactly known for giving me much notice.'

Dulcie saw the embarrassment on Alejandro's face. He had been caught full-footed in the lie. So much for it being over, something that belonged in the past; a situation from before she had come along.

She looked away. If she had been conflicted about doing this before, now she really didn't want to go ahead. Was there any way to still get out of it? She cast around the car park for Georges, but he had already left, and the guide who had taken her skis was returning to their group with an expectant look.

She was trapped here.

'Everyone present and correct?' the man asked, clapping his hands together and smiling widely.

Hugh nodded. 'Guys, this is Arnaud, our guide for the day,' he said, stepping back. 'I'll let him debrief.'

'Good morning,' Arnaud smiled as the introductions were made again. He appeared to be in his forties, with a deep tan and grey beard. He looked reassuringly grizzled, as if he belonged in the mountains. 'Hugh has told me you're all advanced skiers, very comfortable with skiing steeps and off piste. Does anyone have any injuries, disabilities? Any worries I should know about?'

They all nodded and shook their heads as appropriate. Dulcie could feel Alejandro's stare still fixed upon her but she wouldn't look over. Was

Martina the reason he hadn't moved into the flat last night? And was their date today the reason he had delayed coming over till tonight?

'*Bon.* So, then, given the bluebird conditions, if you like, we can go straight from the summit today. Well, very nearly the summit. French law prohibits a heli drop-off, so it will be from the Italian side, which is slightly off the top, but … Everyone happy with that? … *Superbe*. Well, then, the pilot's ready when you are. I just need you to sign these forms, and then we can get going …'

He held out an iPad and Dulcie scanned the page quickly, signing with icy fingers.

'Let's get warmed up,' Hugh smiled, offering her his arm as they walked to the chopper. He was marking her as his – not that there was any doubt. Hugh had asked her here, and Alejandro had asked Martina. This was a double date, plain and simple.

The downdraught from the rotors was immense but Dulcie ducked low, handing over her helmet to Arnaud as she climbed up into the aircraft. Hugh sat down beside her, Alejandro and Martina settling opposite them. Arnaud sat up front with the pilot.

'First time in a chopper?' Hugh shouted to her as they buckled up.

'No!' she replied. He seemed surprised, if not a little disappointed, and she realized she had to allow him his moment – she had to play the game if she wanted to win her prize. 'But I've never been in one as smart as this!'

His smile brightened again; Alejandro's eyes darkened, but she looked away, resolving to ignore his sulking presence here. She was here to work, and if flattery was required, then flattery was what Hugh Cecil would get. 'Client care' was a thing for a reason.

She put on the ear mufflers as the door was closed, the pilot finishing off his checks with practised efficiency. The cab was small and Alejandro's feet intersected with hers as he sat opposite, his gaze fixed on Hugh's thigh pressed lightly against her own. She refused to notice, choosing to stare out of the window instead as she privately raged in her head. She felt furious with herself for having gone over there yesterday, an idiot offering him free accommodation – and what they both knew was really behind the offer.

Within moments they were taking off, and she watched as the heliport quickly became a bare patch in the snowy landscape; suburban houses and grand villas, gardens and city offices rapidly minimized into flat, one-

dimensional blocks far below. The lake was steel grey, a solitary sailing boat ploughing a path west.

They headed for the mountains, the Alps rising immediately on the southern shore, the horizon crenellated as the vast range swept back in deep folds. Dulcie felt herself relax at the sight. Skiing had always been her favourite sport, a family tradition. Her parents had taught her as a toddler, but even after the accident, when she came back here in the school holidays, she and her grandmother would go up to their small two-bedroomed chalet in Verbier, living off raclette and fondue and dark chocolate. She had become expert without ever thinking about it, just following her family's tracks down the slope like a gosling after the goose.

Distant clouds were coming in from the east, a gauzy spindrift catching on the peaks and bringing a light threat of a change in conditions later, but that wasn't her problem; Arnaud and the pilot would make all the decisions regarding the day's itinerary. She didn't need to plan or think. All she had to do was follow – and get Hugh to commit to hiring her.

She didn't lift her eyes from the view as they flew over the valleys, her chin in her hand as she looked down at the snow, deep and plush at these altitudes, the fir trees thickly frosted.

Soon enough they were above Mont Blanc, the mighty massif recognizable from every angle, and she could see a few brightly coloured groups already skinning their way up to the summit on the French side, skis bound to their backs. They looked up at the helicopter coming in above them, taking the easy route.

They began to descend and she looked out, her eyes tracking the fall lines, couloirs and unpisted runs, but the snow was being whipped up like icing powder past the windows and she sat back at last. They touched down and disembarked quickly, everyone busy with their gear: helmets and goggles were put on, ski boots clipped tightly. They stepped into their skis and checked the bindings.

Arnaud handed them each a slim backpack. 'Right, guys, so don't take these off. They have avalanche transponders and GPS tracking inside. If the worst happens, the pack will automatically inflate, increasing your chances of getting to the surface of the slide and staying on top. If you need to get my attention on a descent, shout! Use your voices. We're going to drop in just over there …' He pointed with his pole. 'It's steep, but not for long, widening out into a bowl where we can then take a view on the rest of the

route down. I'll go first, then you come down one after the other. Don't drop in till you hear my call or see my arm go up. I want a good first look at you before we go any further. Got it?'

'Got it,' they replied in unison.

'Any questions? Anyone doubting their life choices right now? There's no shame in getting back in the chopper and meeting us further down …' He looked at them slowly in turn. 'No? … Okay, good. Let's do this.'

The men tapped the ends of their poles together as if in some sort of buddy ritual. Arnaud motioned for the pilot to take off and they instinctively crouched as the helicopter began lifting up again, whirling up a miniature snowstorm.

'Alé, can you help me with my top clip?' Martina pleaded with a pout. 'It still feels a bit loose.'

'… Sure.'

Dulcie stood nearby, trying not to listen in as she wrapped the pole straps around her wrists. Hugh poled over to her. 'You're sure you're feeling good?'

'Never better,' she shrugged. 'I'm really excited.'

'Me too,' he grinned, seeming pleased by her reaction. '… I have a feeling today is going to be great.' He stared at her meaningfully.

She smiled. 'Well, if we can't find joy in this …' she said, motioning to their extraordinary location.

'Listen, I want you to go in front of me,' Hugh said as they started heading towards the lip.

'No. You should get first tracks – well, second anyway, after Arnaud. You're the host. This is your day.'

But he shook his head. 'If anything happens to you – and I'm sure it won't – but in case it does, then I can swoop in and be your hero.'

She laughed, aware of Alejandro's attention on their conversation as he finished tightening Martina's boot clip. 'I promise you, no heroics will be required. I do all my own saving.'

He was bemused. 'Ah, so you're a strong, independent woman.'

'You mean you didn't know that already?'

He didn't argue. 'Well, I would still feel happier if you went first. If nothing else, pearls before swine …' He smiled gallantly, knowing full well there was nothing suilline about him. 'I'm afraid I really must insist.'

She looked up at him. ‘Well, if you’re going to insist … Thank you. I’ll try not to make a mess as I go.’

‘You couldn’t if you tried. I’ll bet even your tracks are pretty.’

Alejandro tugged down sharply on Martina’s trouser leg and stood up. ‘Better?’

‘Perfect.’ She smiled seductively, leaning over for him to kiss her.

Dulcie looked away quickly and down at the precipitous drop, not wanting to watch. She was here to work, not to play games. It was none of her business whom Alejandro Riveras kissed.

They did five drops before they stopped for some *vin chaud* at a bar; everyone was hungry, but Hugh was keen to make the most of the light before it faded so had booked a late lunch. Snacks and drinks now would have to keep them going for another few hours.

They shuffled into the wooden chalet together and found a table by the window. Dulcie was grateful for the opportunity to check in with Helda; she called the house and was reassured that nothing had changed down there.

She had been checking her phone at the end of every pass, but she still felt nervous. They were on top of the world here, so high and removed from civilization, it felt as far away as if they were in space. What if the call did come in? For all of Hugh’s confidence that they could be back down in fifteen minutes, would it be that straightforward? Every time she’d stood at the top of a run, she had looked down upon the billowing peaks, the lake hidden from view at these altitudes, feeling anxious and guilty that she was out here in the elements, having fun, while down there, in a quiet, dimly lit room …

But it was only for a few hours, she kept reminding herself. Even Helda had been pleased she was ‘getting out for a bit’, and she couldn’t deny how good it felt to move her body: her thighs were burning, her breathing coming hard, her cheeks smacked pink. She laughed at Hugh’s silly jokes. Part of her felt happy, light and carefree – everything her conscience told her she shouldn’t be feeling. For all her need to anticipate her grandmother’s death with respect, life was constantly tugging at her, urging her to rejoin the world.

She and the men all skied to a similar level; Martina was a little less surefooted, but Alejandro was staying close to her and getting ever closer, it seemed. He had scarcely looked Dulcie’s way all morning.

‘Girls’ visit?’ Martina asked her, nodding her head in the direction of the toilets.

The men ordered drinks as they clomped off together. It was impossible to walk elegantly in ski boots.

‘Please tell me you’re feeling the burn too?’ Martina said, catching Dulcie’s eye in the mirror as she came out of a stall a few minutes later.

‘Oh, I’m definitely feeling it,’ Dulcie groaned.

‘I think I thought I was eighteen again when I agreed to do this. My legs are feeling like jelly.’

Dulcie doubted that. Martina looked like she did reformer pilates every day.

‘… Although that may have something to do with last night’s athletics too.’ She winked and gave a coy smile that left Dulcie in no doubt as to what she was alluding.

Dulcie swallowed. ‘Have you been with Alé for long?’

Martina tousled her hair as she scrutinized her reflection in the mirror. ‘Only a few months. I mean, it’s casual – by definition it has to be,’ she laughed throatily, shamelessly waggling her ring finger. She felt no compunction to hide her married status. ‘But he’s just so hard to give up. I keep trying, really I do, but we just can’t stay away from one another. I mean, when it’s that good, you know …?’

Dulcie nodded, trying not to imagine it; hating that she had so readily believed him when he’d said nothing was going on between them anymore. He had played her for a fool, acting jealous over Hugh when all along he had this going with another man’s wife.

‘And you and Hugh are such a cute couple.’

‘Oh, we’re not together. We’re just friends.’

Martina laughed at that, pressing a hand to her arm in a sisterly manner. ‘If you say so, darling,’ she chuckled, heading for the door.

They walked back out to find the men sitting at a table, poring over maps with Arnaud. Alejandro glanced up first, an uneasy expression on his face as he saw them coming back together. Dulcie shot him a withering look as she sat down again. She would talk to him at the first possible opportunity and rescind the offer. If he needed a bed for the night, there was clearly space for him in Martina’s.

‘We were just plotting the next routes,’ Hugh said. ‘Arnaud thinks we should head for this side …’

Dulcie blindly watched his finger trace over the map. ‘Looks great.’ She smiled at Arnaud. ‘We are in your capable hands. Wherever you lead, I’ll follow. I’m just enjoying not having to think about it.’

She reached for her glass of wine and took a sip, feeling the warmth on her lips and the tremble in her hand. A little emotional numbing would be no bad thing. They still had hours to go.

‘So … seeing as we’re taking a breather.’ She looked at Hugh expectantly as the others continued discussing the route. He leaned in eagerly. ‘Your project. Tell me more about it. What exactly is it you want to achieve? The tone for the place, I mean?’

His eyes openly roamed her face. ‘I should just take you there. Then you can see.’

‘You’re heading back to Hong Kong,’ she reminded him.

‘But I’ll be back again in three weeks. I’m over all the time. It’s totally workable, Dulcie.’

He held her gaze, and she knew he wasn’t talking about the project.

She smiled, determined to ignore the intimations. ‘Still, do you have any pictures I could see? You must have something on your phone?’

‘Sure. A few. They’re not very good, though.’ He scrolled through his library, bringing up some candids of a grey stone Jacobean pile, but he kept the phone in his hand, forcing her to lean in close to him to get a better look. She tilted her head, taking in snapshots of mullioned windows; gryphons along the parapet; formal – though overgrown – gardens. Inside were dark oak-panelled rooms, hammerbeam ceilings, huge fireplaces, some velvet Knowle sofas …

At a glance, she suspected they would have to look for woodworm, damp, rot and insulation issues; but once those were sorted, it was easy to see how they could layer up the rooms with colour, texture and print to make the house feel like a home. Quinn would be in his element: a winter palette, velvets and damasks …

‘Wow,’ she smiled, turning to look at him. ‘Well, we could definitely—’

Hugh was so close, his gaze on her lips; she knew he was about to kiss her. He was making no secret of his intentions. None at all.

‘So!’

A glass was suddenly slammed down, making them all jump. Hugh pulled back.

‘Is it a yes on the chute or not?’ Alejandro demanded. ‘Because Arnaud needs to let the pilot know.’

‘Yes, it’s a yes!’ Hugh said, looking annoyed. ‘We already agreed that.’

‘Did we?’ Alejandro shrugged as Martina shuffled in closer to him, draping his arm over her shoulder and resting her head against him. ‘I didn’t hear … It’s a yes, Arnaud.’

The guide nodded and went outside, his phone to his ear as Hugh turned back to her with an irritated sigh; but Dulcie had already looked away and returned to the photos on his phone. She refused to give Alejandro any attention at all. She flicked through pictures of a 1980s kitchen – dark and tiny for a house of that size, but of course originally built with serving staff in mind; a vast drawing room that made the furniture look Lilliputian; a glorious, dusty wine cellar; crumbling outbuildings …

‘The bones are all there,’ she said, determined not to lose momentum. ‘It would be great to see floor plans and see where north is. I’m sure you’d want to move or extend the kitchen …?’

‘Those are all on my laptop back at the hotel.’ He draped his arm across the back of their booth, the suggestion hanging.

‘Well, then, you could email them to me?’

‘Or you could come back with me after this so we can flesh out the details. I’ve got a few hours free before my flight.’

Alejandro’s glass was slammed down again, making Hugh jump once more.

‘What now?’ he demanded.

Alejandro looked at a loss for a moment. ‘… Another?’

‘… Drink?’

‘Yeah.’

Hugh incredulously jabbed a finger towards his still-full drink.

‘Oh …’ Alejandro shrugged. ‘Anyone else?’

Martina happily accepted another, Dulcie watching as he got up and went to order more. She knew it was the moment she needed. There wouldn’t be any more opportunities to talk to him alone today, and the last thing she wanted was him turning up tonight, bag in hand …

‘Actually, Hugh, thinking about it, I’d be up for taking it down a notch for the next few runs. Let my legs recover a little … Obviously there wasn’t any time to get some S&C work in before this, and I’m not really match fit yet. You wouldn’t mind, would you, Martina?’

‘Darling, I would rejoice! My thighs are dead!’ she said in a conspiratorial voice.

‘Of course, whatever you’d like,’ Hugh said solicitously. ‘I’ll go tell Arnaud—’

‘No, no, I’ll go,’ Dulcie insisted. ‘It’s my bad, after all. Why don’t you try and find a new route with Martina?’

‘Uh, okay.’ He looked back at the map spread on the table. ‘… Well, I guess we could look at going down here …’

Dulcie shuffled out of the booth and walked towards the bar. Alejandro was standing on the other side of a tree-trunk pillar, his fingers drumming on the counter as the fresh drinks were set down. She went and stood on his far side, out of sight of the others. She just needed to say what she’d come to say and go again. No fuss, no drama.

‘… We need to talk.’

He looked surprised to see her, then instantly irritated. ‘Do we? Or are you just going to tell me more lies?’

Her mouth dropped open. ‘Excuse me?’ She was astounded by his audacity. ‘When did I lie to you?’

‘You said you were running errands today? In and out, were your exact words. Instead, you’re here on Mont Blanc, on a date?!’

The accusation blew her sideways. How could he turn this on her when he was so clearly the one in the wrong? ‘It’s not a date.’

‘He literally just tried to kiss you, Dulcie!’ His eyes were pinned upon her, his jealousy written all over his face. ‘Would you have stopped him?’

‘Yes!’

He shook his head, not believing her.

She stared at him in disbelief, refusing to be gaslit. She would not let him turn this around on her. ‘God, you’re such a hypocrite. You *did* kiss Martina, right in front of me. You’re here with the woman you told me you’d sent away and weren’t seeing anymore.’

‘I did! And we’re not!’

‘Oh, so this is all just a figment of my imagination, is it?’

He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. ‘It’s not how it looks.’

‘Martina just told me in no uncertain terms how it is.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘What? What did she say?’ he frowned.

‘More than enough.’

‘Fuck,’ he muttered, his jaw balling in frustration as he rubbed his fists into his eyes. ‘Okay, listen – yes, I went over to hers last night, but only to break things off once and for all—’

‘Oh my God, just stop! It’s insulting.’

‘It’s the truth,’ he hissed, leaning back to check the others were still at the table. ‘Ever since I asked her to leave the studio, she’s been crying and calling all the time … I agreed to go over to talk things through in person because I didn’t want to ghost her and be a shitty person. But she didn’t take it well, okay?’

‘So you thought you’d finish it by fucking her and bringing her heli-skiing?’

Alejandro was stunned into silence for several beats. ‘Hugh hit me up asking me to come to this and to bring a plus-one.’ He pinned her with a wild-eyed stare. ‘I didn’t know you were going to be here – and yes, I only asked her to calm her down. A sort of soft landing. That’s it. There’s nothing else happening between us.’

‘Not what she says.’

‘Then she’s lying!’

‘Well, one of you is.’ Dulcie looked away, trying to calm herself. She wasn’t sure which of them to believe, and frankly she didn’t want to care about it either way. Wasn’t this everything she didn’t need? Her life was bad enough right now without this drama on top.

She took a steadying breath. ‘Look, I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again – it’s none of my business what’s going on with you and her—’

‘That’s bullshit! It’s not about Martina. *You’re* the one who keeps coming in and out of my life, blowing hot and cold. You’re driving me crazy. What do you want, Dulcie? Who do you want? Me or him? Just say it.’

His eyes bored into hers, refusing to let her hide this time, demanding the truth. She looked over at Hugh; he was still bent over the map with Martina, the two of them tracing a route. They hadn’t noticed Dulcie and Alé talking.

She looked back at him. ‘Surely it can’t have escaped your attention that I’m trying to land his country house as our new project?’ she hissed.

‘What?’

‘I had to be discreet about it when Tom was with us the other night, but I only agreed to come here today so we could talk more about it.’ There. She had come clean about her real motives.

His eyes narrowed. ‘… So you’re leading him on to get the job?’

‘Wow.’ She stared back at him. That was what he took from this? ‘I’m not leading him on. In case you hadn’t noticed, he’s the one using the job as bait to get me.’

His eyes tracked over her face. ‘And is he? Going to get you?’

She gave a scoff of disbelief. ‘I can’t believe you’d even ask that.’

‘You’re letting him flirt with you.’

‘Well, if you know how I can stop him, I’d be glad to hear it. But I can’t stop him from doing anything until he’s signed the dotted line.’

‘He’s not going to sign anything until he gets you!’

She swallowed at the catch-22. ‘It won’t come to that.’

‘No. That’s exactly what it’s going to come to. You forget I know him, Dulcie. If you want the job and he wants you, then there’s only one way you can both get what you want.’

‘Or I get it on merit,’ she argued. ‘Is that really so hard to imagine?’

‘You think Hugh’s got to where he is because he doesn’t know how to leverage?’ He looked at her almost pityingly, as though it was all a terrible, inevitable conclusion.

In his mind, it was.

This was pointless, she realized. They couldn’t talk for arguing, destined to be at cross purposes with one another.

‘Wow. You think so highly of me,’ she muttered, stepping back. ‘Good to know, Alé.’

‘No, that wasn’t what I—’

He thought she had no integrity, nothing more to offer than a pretty face. ‘But you see the irony, right? Me being lectured on ethics by the guy who’s sleeping with his client’s wife?’

His expression changed, but she was determined to have the last word this time, even though she was beginning to shake with emotion: anger, bitter disappointment and yes, jealousy … It was a toxic mix in her bloodstream.

‘I didn’t come over here to fight with you, Alé. I only came to tell you I’m pulling the offer. You can’t stay at the flat. It was a mistake, I never should have said anything. Don’t come over tonight.’

‘But—’ He looked shocked.

‘I’m sure you’ve got plenty of other options, though, so I won’t lose sleep over it.’

‘Dulcie, wait—’

But she moved off before he could stop her. She would have laughed if she could have been sure she wouldn’t cry.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

Paris
26 September 1962

Was she doing this right? Could people tell? Lise fiddled with the gold cocktail ring on her gloved left hand, but no one was looking at her. They were all talking about the upcoming performance with feverish anticipation.

Nureyev was dancing *Giselle* with Margot Fonteyn – a special performance with the Royal Ballet, and his first return to the Paris stage since defecting on tour with the Kirov the year before. The energy in the building was palpable. The women were in their best, most fashionable gowns and Lise herself was no exception; she had chosen a Balenciaga dress that would be far too *à la mode* for embassy events. It had a formidably plain, almost T-shirt-type top and flared out in a conical silhouette to a black grosgrain skirt, with a bow at the loose waist and a canted hemline that swooped up in front to reveal her lower legs. Her hair was worn in a beehive, with golden pear drops at her ears and her signature cat's-eye make-up. She had wanted to sink into the background tonight, to be a shadow in the dark, but Leo had pointed out to her that that would only draw attention. She had to do everything she normally did, and that meant standing out: an avant-garde dress, statement jewels. Give drama. Make it an event … Making sure everyone looked at her was how she would fly below the radar.

Valentin, beside her, was looking debonair as ever in his dinner suit. He was talking with the people in the next box, exchanging meaningless platitudes and laughing at limp jokes. He didn't notice her distractedness, how her gaze kept swooping around the dazzling red velvet auditorium, looking down into the stalls for faces she knew and recognized. There were

many now – including Beatrice and her husband, Tristan, of course. They were always in the Erlachs' slipstream, she had come to realize. Tatton Wagstaff was sitting with a good-looking younger man, a 'junior from the London office', and waved merrily to her when he caught sight of her on high.

She felt a pang of relief at seeing a friend here, but the only person who truly mattered to her wouldn't be coming tonight. In fact, Leo had made his apologies for the last few events to which they had both been invited, not wanting to risk them giving themselves away in public together. He had none of Valentin's flair for the cool lie; his eyes spoke of his heart.

But it was already too late. Their secret was not theirs alone.

Her hand went to the ring again, her finger tapping nervously on its hollow dome as she continued scanning the crowd. She caught sight of Eva and Pierre in conversation with the couple beside them and felt another sharp pang of sadness at the ongoing estrangement from her old friend. She missed her, and she knew Eva must still attribute her ongoing silence to the shock and betrayal of Valentin's affair; she believed Lise to be heartbroken over the exposure of her hollow marriage, knowing nothing of the paradise she had found in its ruins. But that was precisely why her continued absence was necessary. The need for discretion was about far more now than simply stopping gossip.

As if sensing her stare, Eva looked up, catching sight of her in her box. They stared across the theatre, reading the regret in each other's faces, but the house lights were beginning to dim – everyone's cue to take their seats – and Lise looked away first. This was no time for nostalgia. She had a job to do.

All around them, the crowd clapped and cheered as the conductor came in and took his bow. Lise sat straight-backed in her chair, aware of curious gazes sweeping over her and off again as the room gradually settled into silence. She was visible here, that was the point of these seats – to see and be seen. People were still clamouring for the gala ball tickets, and they would recall her presence here tonight. It would provide an alibi.

Darkness fell over them. She reached for her opera glasses as the first violin crossed his bow over the strings, the red velvet curtains sweeping back. Anticipation was high for the first sighting of Nureyev, but Lise knew he wouldn't come on until Act II. She had already been informed of all the pertinent details for tonight.

Orchestral sounds billowed and rolled into the space, filling it like a thunderstorm caught in a box. The energy was electric as Fonteyn set the stage alight with nimble quick-steps and darting, fairylike élan, showing them all why she was a worldwide star. The diminutive prima looked beautiful under the lights, everyone's eyes following her closely as she leapt and turned with mesmerizing grace. To look so fragile and yet be so athletic … It reminded Lise of something Leo had told her as they lay in bed. Something he himself had been told in his 'briefing': *When you are strong, appear weak. When you are weak, appear strong.*

That was the point of all this peacocking, standing by her important husband's side. She only stood in proximity to power, security and comfort. She was weakness dressed up as strength; that was why this would work. Let them underestimate her.

No one noticed at the end of the first act as she put an apologetic hand lightly on Valentin's thigh and indicated she would be right back. He was too busy clapping with their neighbours and lauding Fonteyn's brilliance to care as she slipped out of the back of the box and headed for the nearest restroom.

It was halfway along the deserted corridor, and as she pushed on the door, she caught sight of herself reflected dozenfold in the mirrors. For a split second, she saw the apprehension on her own face – pale and tense, her fear giving her away.

The attendant looked up from polishing the taps and Lise mustered her most gracious smile.

'*Bonsoir*,' she murmured, pulling off her gloves as she headed into the second stall on the left, as instructed, and locked it behind her. Through the speakers, she heard the orchestra rally into the second act, and from the sudden cheer that erupted, she knew Nureyev had swept onto the stage at last. Not a single person in there would notice her absence. Even Valentin had probably forgotten she had left.

She looked at the tray of towels and tissues laid out along the back shelf. Everything was neatly folded with utmost precision, but she lifted the fourth in from the left, per her directions. There beneath it lay exactly what she had been looking for.

Glancing over her shoulder, she listened to the sound of the assistant moving about and performing her duties on the other side of the door. She looked down at the ring on her finger, her pulse rapid.

Switch it for the replica and leave. That was all she had to do to get Leo off the hook and for them to be free. This would be behind them.

But her nail found the tiny groove on the side, and she pressed on it. The dome top flipped open, revealing a tightly coiled loop of microfilm. Lise stared down at it, knowing better than to lift it out. What lay inside in that microscopic script?

What mattered so much that a man's life was held in abeyance for it?

She heard the attendant clear her throat on the other side of the stall door and quickly snapped the ring shut again, switching it over for the replica. A glance revealed it was identical, except there was no groove on the side of this one; the dome was solid. Her hands were shaking, but she made sure the ring was covered and the towels perfectly arranged again before she pulled the flush chain and came out.

She washed and dried her hands without undue haste, replacing her gloves and the new ring as she admired her reflection in the mirror. She looked like a woman with all the time in the world as she pulled a franc from her purse, dropping it into the tips bowl before she left.

'*Bonne soirée*, madame,' the assistant murmured.

Lise looked up and down the corridor as she made her way back to the box but only a seating attendant was in sight, at the far end. She slipped into her seat, fluid as a ripple on a ribbon. It had all taken less than three minutes. No one saw the sudden heat in her cheeks or the bead of wildness in her eyes; every woman here looked like that as she watched Nureyev's magnetic performance.

Still, she ran it all through in her mind, making sure she had made no mistakes. As far as she could tell, it had gone without a hitch, although she knew someone, somewhere in here, was watching her. They had a role to play too.

But who?

The powder-room attendant? Lise had noticed her slight accent. Was that pertinent or paranoia? She saw the world through a new gaze now, her innocence gone. She understood that there were forces at work everywhere, people always moving in the shadows, strategizing their own agendas. She looked down at Eva, a friend with split loyalties; she looked at Beatrice smiling beside her husband, the man she made a cuckold over and over. Her gaze fell to Valentin too, in the very periphery of her field of vision, the mannered diplomat with a gambler's heart. They each had their elegant

secrets; they all moved with the utmost discretion. As Leo had told her while she lay in his arms that very afternoon, all warfare is based on deception.

Lise was staring at the headline as Stephan, her regular waiter at Les Deux Magots, set down her coffee. It was still early, and only Café de Flore was yet basking in the morning sun further up the road, but Lise didn't care. She had scarcely slept, her body restless, her mind unable to settle, the adrenaline from the previous night still rushing through her blood. She didn't regret her actions – but she did wonder what it was she had done.

Her job had been simply to swap the rings in the bathroom on the segue between Acts I and II, but her brain wouldn't stop trying to fill in the gaps. What had been on the microfilm? If Markov had told Leo, her lover wasn't telling her. He had been adamant that the less she knew, the better; 'plausible deniability' had been the phrase he used. It was bad enough she had insisted on being involved, he said. But how could she not? She had inserted herself into this when she had refused to bow down to Markov's initial threats of exposure; once she understood Leo's life was on the line, she had no choice. If access to Valentin's office was what they wanted, she was the obvious candidate, no matter how much Leo fiercely protested. Even he had had to concede that she could move freely around the embassy without raising suspicions. She could take a nap on Valentin's desk and no one would object!

And yet, in the end, it had been even simpler than that. The duplicate ring had been brought to her in the Bulgari box, already 'loaded', Sylvie unwittingly drawn into the deception as she laid out the options in Lise's dressing room. The Russians already had someone else inside the Swiss embassy; they only needed Lise to move the material out. Wear a ring. Switch it. That was all it took to make her a spy. But what had happened after she made the swap? What came next?

'*Merci*,' she said as the waiter moved off, her eyes falling back to the newspaper headline: 'The Bamako People's Court Accuses the French Embassy'.

Her attention snagged on the word *embassy*. Paranoia? Or the obvious response of an ambassador's wife?

She read through carefully, but the story focused on the French embassy; it would have nothing to do with Valentin's office … She scanned down the

page, looking at the other headlines.

‘British Labour Party’s concern over escalating tensions in Southern Rhodesia’. She read that too, catching the gist of it quickly: they were worried about ‘another Algerian war’. Not a Swiss problem.

Another line caught her eye: ‘The Soviet government has postponed the abolition of the payroll tax …’ Interesting. A Russian story, but a domestic affair. She sighed, continuing on, her leg jigging anxiously, with no idea what she was looking for.

‘Unemployment Situation Serious in Constantine’ … no. ‘Ferrières Notary Taken Prisoner’ … no. She turned the page and read down.

It was on the third page that her attention was snagged: ‘Kennedy Delays Cuba Deal for Election Advantage’.

Cuba?

She read fast: the Donovan negotiations were proposing that the United States ‘supply $62m of food and medicine in exchange for the release of the American hostages’ from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion the year before. The ongoing situation was volatile and sensitive. Castro was still ‘prepared to execute the prisoners in the event of further attack against Cuba’, but the American president, this report exclusively revealed, wanted to ‘hold the situation in abeyance’ for six weeks to ‘avoid it becoming a political issue’ during domestic elections.

Lise sat back, understanding the repercussions at once. This leak now made it a political issue. It made JFK look bad both at home and on the international stage – no one liked to see election points being placed over human lives – and it deprived the embargoed Cuban people of much-needed food and medication too.

But there was a third casualty in this, as well, for Lise knew what the general public did not: that Washington was using Switzerland’s embassy as its proxy in Havana while the cold war persisted between the two nations. Valentin, as the Swiss ambassador to France and already working with Donovan himself, would have had eyes on the meeting memoranda in which these matters had been discussed and were now laid out here.

This would all come back to him.

She and Leo were safe – no one would ever think to accuse them – but Valentin would be identified as the leak instead.

For several minutes, she couldn’t move as she foresaw how it would unravel. The scale of the fallout felt immense. Overwhelming. All she had

wanted was to help her lover, to extricate him from Markov's threats; by bowing to the Russian's demands, it kept their affair under wraps. She had thought she'd been protecting not just Leo but Valentin too: a one-time-only deal to save them all.

It had seemed so innocuous. *Just wear the ring.*

Had Valentin seen this yet? There was every chance he hadn't. He might have had a breakfast meeting, or perhaps he was getting dressed, picking his cufflinks, choosing a tie … It was still so early. She had been one of the first up, the night staff only just clocking off their shifts as she left on one of her dawn walks.

She put down a five-franc note for her untouched coffee and left, pushing past a couple loitering by a table and walking quickly through the shadows down Boulevard Saint-Germain.

She didn't know what she was going to do. She still couldn't be completely sure this was even her own doing, but she had an instinct – a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, bile rising at the back of her throat – telling her that it was. She had done this.

Within minutes she could see the golden dome of Les Invalides ahead of her as she turned onto the Rue de Grenelle, her heart pounding as she tried to work through the various options. She could say nothing, confess at once, bluff it out and see how the cards fell once the story broke … Valentin was a master diplomat. If he could charm a dictator, he could smooth this over, surely?

As she drew closer, she saw the security guards standing by the huge blue double doors that fronted the embassy courtyard, and she felt the weight of their duty now for the first time. Not merely ceremonial, they represented the enforcement of Swiss national security in this city away from home.

'Madame Erlach,' one murmured as she passed by. She recognized him as the one who had been guarding the back gate the night of the Giacometti exhibition.

'*Bonjour*.' Her eyes rose to the embassy building, looking up into empty windows. Valentin's office was on the first floor, the grander ground-floor salons kept for entertaining purposes.

She walked up the stone steps and into the building to be greeted with the usual familiar morning scenes. There were no immediate signs of the world ending just yet – some secretaries walking past, talking and carrying files; a cleaner polishing a window; a florist restocking a marble urn …

Lise went up the stairs and started along the corridor towards Valentin's office, taking a deep breath as she steeled herself. She must not let him read it on her face. Remain quiet. Passive. Appear weak. Let him lead, she told herself. She must assess the damage first, not incriminate herself – or worse, Leo.

Otto looked up as she passed by his door. 'Oh – madame!' he called urgently, drawing her back.

She popped her head in the door. Four men, juniors on the team, were seated on the other side of his desk. She gave a vague smile. 'Yes?'

'The ambassador is on a call. He has asked not to be disturbed.'

She felt her stomach drop. 'I see.' She saw the copy of *Le Monde* on his desk was opened to the third page. They had seen it. '… Will he be long?'

'Shouldn't be too much longer now.'

'Fine. Then I'll wait.'

'Uh, but then he has a meeting with—'

'I must see my husband urgently about something,' she said with rare firmness. 'It'll only take a moment.'

Otto swallowed. 'Of course.'

She went over to the chair positioned outside Valentin's door. She felt ridiculous sitting there, like a schoolgirl called to see the headmistress, but she couldn't afford to wait for him to make time for her. She already knew he would be in back-to-back meetings all day. She had seen the stress on Otto's face; they were already shifting into crisis mode.

Was Valentin on the phone to Washington right now? She calculated the time difference. It would be the middle of the night over there. Had the president been informed? Was her husband talking with one of Kennedy's deputies? The minutes ticked past and she felt her panic grow. Her immediate sense of foreboding in the café had been nothing to what was unravelling here now. More and more people were coming down the corridors, carrying files and wearing sombre expressions. They passed in and out of Otto's office, the door constantly closing and opening.

The atmosphere felt fetid, as if the air itself was heavy, laden with a poison they couldn't see. Her breath was becoming more shallow as her nerves grew. How long had Valentin been on this call now? Fifteen minutes? More?

She heard a commotion from down the hall and lifted her head in time to see the American ambassador striding down the hall. He was a large man

and now his cheeks were florid, a look of rage on his face.

‘Mr Ambassador!’ Otto cried, flying out of his office after him.

Lise jumped up, composing herself for the unexpected encounter. ‘Mr Ambassador,’ she began. ‘I’m afraid Valentin is on a call. Would you like a coffee while we wait?’

‘Wait, my ass!’ the ambassador said, brushing past her and throwing open the office door. He marched in, Lise following closely behind him, both of them halting in their tracks as they were stopped by the sight in front of them—

Her husband’s polished shoes, revolving slowly, at head height.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lake Geneva
4 December 2026

They hovered over the lawn, descending slowly. Dulcie could see Anna standing by the bedroom window upstairs, Helda below her by the library door, their figures silhouetted like dolls in a toy house. It had been many years since a helicopter had landed in the garden.

‘You know, you really didn’t have to drop me back,’ Dulcie said into the headset.

‘It was the very least I could do,’ Hugh replied. ‘Why suffer rush-hour traffic when you don’t need to?’

‘Nice philosophy if you can afford it,’ she smiled.

‘That’s a rather glorious pad you call home,’ Hugh said, his eyes falling to the handsome villa. Lamps were only switched on in several rooms across the three floors, but they were all illuminated by the lights coming from the hallway so that the house seemed to glow like a lantern. There was no doubt it had a formal, noble aspect from this vantage point on the semicircular lawn to the side of the terrace.

‘Oh, it’s my grandmother’s. Not mine.’ Not yet, and she was in absolutely no rush to inherit.

‘Still … Incredible spot, right on the lake. Those rarely ever come to market … Is that a vineyard?’ Hugh was leaning over her to see better from the window, his legs pressed comfortably against hers.

‘Old one. Not cultivated anymore.’

‘Why not? Swiss wines are superlative. I love the stuff, the problem is they won’t ever sell it.’

‘That was the case with my family. They only ever produced small batches. Mainly for their own needs.’

He looked at her intently. ‘That’s so old-school – grow your own wine. Bottle it. Drink it.’

‘Yeah, I guess,’ she shrugged.

‘You know,’ he said, flashing her a winning smile suddenly. ‘I’d really love to see inside. Just for a few minutes. It might give me a sense of your eye.’

She knew perfectly well it wasn’t her eye he was interested in.

She could feel Alejandro watching them – and listening in. He didn’t have much choice; even the pilot was privy to their conversation. ‘I’m afraid I can’t claim any credit for it, though I’d love to. But my grandmother … I’ve been out for hours now, and I really do need to go and sit with her.’ Her tone was firm, but she smiled. ‘Raincheck?’

‘Sure,’ he replied, sitting back with a disappointed look.

‘You could come for drinks next time? It’s not like this place is going anywhere,’ she said, not wanting the rebuttal to be a slammed door between them.

He grinned again. ‘Okay. I’ll let you know when I’m next passing through.’

The helicopter touched down, snow whirling like icing sugar again. Arnaud ran round to slide back the door for her as she removed her headset and air-kissed Hugh on the cheeks.

‘It’s been a fantastic day, thank you so much. I really loved it … Bye, Alé,’ she said quickly, not meeting his eyes as she focused on his companion instead. ‘Lovely to meet you, Martina.’

‘And you,’ Martina purred. ‘We should all do this again sometime. We make a cute four, no?’

Dulcie looked back at her host. ‘And Hugh, send me those floor plans, please. I’d like to start putting some ideas together.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he grinned.

Arnaud safely moved her skis well out of the range of the rotor before saying goodbye too and jumping back in. She waved as the helicopter took off again, its lights flashing in the dark sky as it lifted up, up, up … before its nose dipped and it changed direction, towards the lake.

Helda was waiting for her by the terrace door of the library, holding a large cutting of a pine branch. ‘Georges could have collected you,’ she said

as Dulcie carried through her skis.

‘I know; I did tell them,’ she sighed, her body sagging as she moved back into the embrace of home again. ‘But Hugh was quite insistent.’

They walked straight through the darkened room together, the silhouettes of chesterfields, sofa tables and lamps marking the way as they moved between the bookcases and out into the hall.

She stopped at the sight of the fourteen-foot Christmas tree now standing centre stage.

‘Oh! … Was that today?’ she exclaimed. ‘I wish you’d told me! I’d have stayed back here to help.’

‘We forgot too,’ Helda admitted.

Their tree was always delivered on the same date every year, but they all had other things on their minds right now. How could they feel festive when their world was mired in gloom?

Dulcie knew it would have taken Helda and Georges hours to lever the tree into position (there was a hook in the ceiling specifically for the annual task). She saw that the circular table and floral arrangements had been moved to the side of the stairs, the boxes of candles and decorations brought down from the attic too and piled in groups on the floor.

It was always a two-day job, dressing the villa for Christmas, and Dulcie felt guilty that she hadn’t been here to help. ‘Was it a nightmare?’

‘Don’t worry – Max came for his money at last, so Georges roped him into helping out.’

‘Thank goodness for that.’

‘So how was it?’ Helda asked, throwing another log on the fire. It had been burning all day; ashes were piled up in the hearth.

‘Incredible,’ she sighed, leaning against the newel post and unclipping her ski boots. ‘We couldn’t have had a better day up there. The snow’s amazing. But I am shattered. I think I must have skied fifty miles? Practically all of it sheer vertical.’

‘It was exactly what you needed, a day in the sunshine. You look better for it; you’ve got colour again. Shall I run you a bath?’

Dulcie waved a hand. ‘It’s okay, I’ll do it. I need to get out of these clothes … I take it there’s been no change with Granny?’

‘You would have heard from us if so. She was awake for a few minutes early afternoon, but not for very long. She was peaceful, but …’ The housekeeper shook her head to indicate they had been strangers today.

‘And Wags?’

‘Behaving himself. I think he knows he’s in Anna’s bad books. We didn’t tell him your grandmother stirred, of course. He’s been playing chess – against himself – for most of the day. I told him you’d gone skiing and he declared he was very jealous.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘In his room, having what he called a “pre-prandial nap” – whatever that is.’ Helda rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll bring you a hot chocolate while you run the bath.’

Dulcie smiled. Helda’s hot chocolate – with real chocolate buttons, melted – had always been her post-ski treat. There was no question of not having one.

She went wearily upstairs, her hand trailing on the bannister. In her room, she stripped down to her thermals and flopped onto the bed. Was there any better feeling than taking off ski kit?

Outside the blackened bedroom windows, snowflakes were spinning in light flurries: a little bit of her day brought back down with her to sea level. She went into her ensuite and opened the taps in her bath, extravagantly pouring in half a bottle of her favourite bath oil. She felt deserving of a treat after her trials today, the argument with Alejandro still weighing upon her. She had managed to get through the rest of the day barely even looking at him, but she had felt the tension between them and far from feeling angry, she had mainly felt sad. Which was worse.

She felt drained from all the pretending and as she waited for the bath to fill, she collapsed again onto the bed, feeling the heaviness in her muscles and the exertions from the slopes catching up with her.

She closed her eyes, just for a moment …

‘Dulcie, wake up!’

Her eyes flew open in time to see Helda jostling past, still holding the mug of hot chocolate.

‘There’s water everywhere!’

‘What?’ She jumped up, disoriented, but immediately seeing the inch-deep, bubble-frothing water on the bathroom floor butting up to her thick bedroom carpet. ‘… Oh my God!’ she wailed. ‘I’m such an idiot!’

She heard the squeak of the taps being closed, Helda grabbing the towels on the radiator and laying them upon the flooded floor. They were sodden

immediately, making no tangible difference.

‘I’ll get more,’ Dulcie gasped, running out to the airing cupboard and pulling out as many fresh towels as she could. Together they pressed them on the floor, absorbing the pool of water, seeing how the inch-depth was slowly suckered up.

It took sixteen bath sheets to clear it, Helda rolling and squeezing the excess water out into the shower tray.

‘Ugh,’ Dulcie groaned, furious with herself as she saw the tideline seeping into the carpet. No doubt it would leave a water mark, not to mention the risk of damp in the floor joists.

‘We’d better check downstairs too,’ Helda sighed, carrying half of the towels out. They were heavy this wet.

Dulcie took the rest, following her back down the stairs, and they dumped the towels in the laundry. They walked through to the drawing room, which was directly below her bathroom, and stood with their hands on their hips, looking up. Rivulets of water could be seen beading and dripping from the plaster in a dozen places, running along the wooden beams and down where they met the walls. There was a pool of water on the rug too where it had come through via the chandelier.

‘Dammit,’ she muttered. Luckily, there were no bulges or obvious catchments of water that might herald a structural collapse of the ceiling, but it would need a repaint at the very least. And an electrician; the lights were flickering badly. ‘Just what we need.’

‘I suppose it could have been worse. I’ll get another towel,’ Helda said, eyeing the wet spot on the antique Heriz rug with alarm. She dashed out, leaving Dulcie chastising herself. How could she have been so careless?

She saw a trickle of water running down the wall behind the gilded frame of an oil painting. She knew it was her grandmother’s favourite – a view of the lake, looking up to the mountains – and was dramatically muted in its colour palette: little more than a range of creams, whites and soft greys, with just a single amber dot denoting a figure in the snow. Dulcie had never been able to understand how so much could be conveyed with so little elaboration.

She lifted it off the wall and set it down carefully across the arms of one of the armchairs. If it were to absorb the damp or humidity, it might bubble or warp.

She went over to the fireplace and struck a match, getting the ready-set fire going. The sooner they started the drying-out process in here, the better.

'Helda,' she said quizzically as the housekeeper returned with a towel. 'Do we have a dehumidifier? I feel like we do.'

'In the garage.'

'Okay. I'll go get it.'

'Not wearing that you won't,' Helda said, eyeballing Dulcie's long johns and long-sleeved top. 'Georges can go when he gets back from the shop.'

'They're thermals, I'm perfectly warm.'

'It's—'

'I'll only be a minute.' Dulcie dashed out, skittering carefully across the courtyard. It was icy and the fountain had begun to freeze up. She pulled the garage door along on its rails and went inside, heading for the area at the back where Georges kept tools and various pieces of equipment. She saw the dehumidifier in the corner. It was bigger than she remembered. Heavier, too. Now she understood Helda's sceptical look. She wouldn't be able to carry it on her own. She would have to pivot it on its opposite corners.

She began lumbering it through the space, half straddling it and grunting with effort. A slow process. As she reached the doors a car pulled up outside, the beams of headlights swinging into the courtyard – Georges! Well timed. He could help after all.

She heard the thunk of the car door and stuck her head out from the garage to call him over – only to find Alejandro disembarking from an Uber. He stopped as he caught sight of her, strangely positioned behind the doors.

He frowned. 'Everything okay?'

She blinked. Was this a fever dream? Hadn't she specifically said to him, don't come? And how had he got here so soon? She'd been helicoptered into the garden and she'd still only had time to flood the bathroom. By the time they would have landed at the heliport and he travelled back to l'Hermitage, then come over here, surely he could only have been at home for a few moments? Long enough to change into jeans and a chunky jumper, evidently, but still …

Immediately, she was defensive. 'What are you doing here, Alé? I was perfectly clear—'

'I know; but can we just talk?'

Her eyes fell to the duffel bag slung over his shoulder. Clearly he was expecting victory from this conversation. She bridled. ‘No! We have nothing more to say to one another.’

‘We can’t leave things like this.’

‘Actually, we can.’ She ducked down and tried to catch the driver’s eye as he began to drive off. ‘Hey! Can you take him back, please?’ she called through the glass. But she was too late; he couldn’t see her half hidden behind the garage doors. ‘Wait!’ she yelled, waving her arms, but she was still straddled over the dehumidifier unit and couldn’t get out in time.

‘You’ll have to call another one,’ she said crossly. ‘I don’t know how I can be more clear – you can’t stay here.’ If she was rude, she no longer cared, and she disappeared back inside the garage, feeling her heart thud. She’d already had more than her share of arguments today.

She listened to the sound of his footsteps. He could walk down to the gates and wait on the street—

‘What are you doing?’

She looked up. Alejandro was standing by the door. He looked down at the machine plonked in front of her, taking in her awkward, wide-legged stance, clearly trying to move it. In her thermals.

‘You need some help with that?’

‘No.’

‘No? You’re just standing out here in the cold, in your base layers, for fun?’

‘It’s nothing.’ She stepped back, dusting her hands off. ‘Georges can deal with it when he gets back.’

‘… Or I could? … Seeing as I’m here right now?’

‘It’s not necessary—’

He sighed. ‘Who knew you were so stubborn?’ He threw down his bag and went over, picking up the dehumidifier with ease. ‘Where do you need it?’

‘I said—!’

‘Or I can just work it out myself. I’ll assume the house?’ He began striding across the courtyard with it.

‘No, I just want you to go, Alé! It’s been a long day, and I’m tired—’

‘Then I’ll go as soon as I’ve done this. But you can’t seriously ask an eighty-year-old man to heave this around.’

He glanced at her in rebuke but didn't slow down, carrying it into the house and finding himself in the grand double-height reception hall. '… Wow.'

Helda, who was carrying through some pans from the kitchen, blinked back at him.

'Hi,' he said, flashing one of his winning smiles. 'Where would you like me to put this down?'

The housekeeper looked at Dulcie in surprise as she hurried into the hall after him, flustered.

'Uh, it's fine, Helda. He's … he's …' She wasn't going to call him a friend. 'He's harmless.'

Alejandro frowned at her choice of words.

'… Follow me,' Helda replied after a moment, leading him into the drawing room and pointing to where he could set it down. 'There, please … Thank you.'

'My pleasure. I'm Alé, by the way.'

Helda's eyes lit up with recognition. 'Ah! You are the temporary lodger in the garage flat.'

'No. Not anymore, sadly.'

'No?' Helda gave Dulcie a confused look. She had changed the bedsheets in there, cleaned for hours … Been told he was arriving this evening …

'I'm *persona non grata*,' he continued, the words heavily rolled in his accent. 'My fault.' He looked over at Dulcie. 'I've been an idiot.'

Dulcie looked away. If he thought public flagellation or getting Helda onside was going to work—

'Hm,' the housekeeper hummed with an interested look. 'Well, I'll shut the front door, seeing as Dulcie thinks we live in a barn.'

It had been the common rebuke when Dulcie was little, tearing around the place. But in this instance, she'd had good reason to be distracted.

'It's fine, Alé's just leaving,' she called after Helda; but the housekeeper had already left the room.

'Oh no,' Alé said, looking around the room and seeing the all too evident need for the dehumidifier. Helda had put down casserole pots and pans to catch the remaining drips and already, efficiently, removed the rest of the paintings in Dulcie's brief absence, stacking them carefully on the arms of the chairs out of harm's way while the walls were still damp. 'You have a leak?'

‘Something like that,’ Dulcie muttered.

‘Thank God it’s not worse,’ Alejandro said, admiring the space as the housekeeper came back and plugged in the dehumidifier. Immediately, the lights began to flicker again.

‘We’ll need to plug it in from the hall,’ she said.

‘Allow me,’ Alejandro offered.

‘You’re very kind,’ Helda said disloyally. What was she doing, allowing his heroics?

Dulcie watched as they bustled out, their voices drifting through from the reception hall. She shook her head; she knew exactly what he was doing – ingratiating himself, coming across as Mr Nice Guy.

She folded her arms across her chest and waited for him to reappear.

‘Have you called another Uber?’ she asked as he walked back in again a few moments later.

He smiled. ‘Yes.’

‘Right. Good.’

There was a pause.

‘It’s beautiful in here,’ he said.

‘Not right now it isn’t,’ Dulcie said contrarily, taking in the sight of the frame shadows left on the walls. Suddenly the room looked shabby and tired. ‘Just as well Hugh didn’t come in to see it.’

‘Yes. Just as well.’ A note of bitterness glinted off the words, but unlike earlier, he didn’t rise to it. Instead he cast his attention around the room. ‘Do you spend much time in here?’

She sighed. Small talk was torture at the best of times. ‘Yes. It’s where we usually congregate when it’s just us.’

‘Us?’

‘Me and Granny.’

He nodded, his eyes falling to the spectacular portrait on the back wall. It was too large for just one person to remove – that would be a two-man job – but it was furthest away from the water overflow, at least. ‘Is that her?’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s beautiful.’

‘Yes.’

‘You look just like her.’

She rolled her eyes at the compliment, rebutting it. ‘I don’t see it. I think I take after my father …’ Her voice trailed off as she saw him look between

her and the portrait several times, scrutinizing them both. ‘What?’ she asked suspiciously.

He came and stood by her. ‘Do you trust me, if I do something?’

She scowled. ‘No.’

‘Dulcie.’ He sounded both patient and impatient at the same time.

She sighed again. ‘What is it …?’

She flinched as his hands rose up and he held them in the air for a moment – so as not to alarm her – before loosely clasping the sides of her face.

‘Alé, what the hell are you doing?’ she asked, trying to pull back.

‘Sssh,’ he hushed as his thumbs began pressing down lightly on her cheekbones, pushing softly in small impressions. His fingers moved along the curve of her jaw, tracing the planes and angles of her brow, lips, nose … as if she was clay being moulded in his hands. She watched him. His eyes were on the portrait still as he examined her, but then he closed them, exploring her face through touch alone, his other fingers coming into play now, sweeping over her skin.

Her breathing grew shallow. His hands lifted off her.

‘You have her zygomatic and maxillary bones,’ he said with certainty. ‘Assuming that painting is a true likeness.’

He was a facial surgeon now? ‘Oh.’

He stepped away. She had never been touched like that before, seen with fingertips. It felt more intimate than anything she’d known.

Helda came in with a tray: a freshly opened bottle of wine, some glasses and a bowl of olives. ‘Something to tide you over until dinner,’ she said, setting it down.

Dulcie looked at her sharply – she hadn’t requested this, and he wasn’t staying! – but the housekeeper averted her gaze and headed straight for the door again.

When she looked back at Alé, he was pointing to a small bronze on the demi-lune table, his eyebrows arched. ‘That can’t be what I think it is.’

She hesitated. ‘Well, if you think it’s a Diego Giacometti, then yes, it can,’ she muttered, catching the disbelief in his eyes. ‘… Pick it up if you like.’

He walked over, staring at the bronze bowl like a pilgrim approaching a holy relic. The bowl was fixed upon a flat base with two birds perched,

naively rendered. He lifted it as if it was a newborn baby, handling it tenderly, one artist communing with another.

'You like it?' she asked, glancing over her shoulder as she went over to the tray. It wouldn't kill her to give him one tiny glass of wine while he waited for his cab. God knows she needed a drink and besides, she wasn't a barbarian.

'You're joking, yes?' His gaze upon it strengthened. 'He was brilliant. He's always been a major influence on me. His white resin pieces for Picasso are why I love working with plaster. He always made it seem so playful,' he murmured, peering at the bronze from all sides.

She poured the wine into the glasses and came to join him. 'Granny was friends with him – and his brother, Alberto, but she knew Diego for longer, I think.'

He put the bowl back down as she handed him his drink.

'It looks like she knew a lot of people,' he said, his attention falling to the photograph beside the bowl. 'Is that Rudolf Nureyev?'

Dulcie didn't need to look at it to know the story. She had grown up hearing all the family anecdotes, long before she had come to realize the historical importance of some of those figures.

'Yes. With Margot Fonteyn. They danced a special performance at the Paris Opera soon after he defected. My grandfather was the Swiss ambassador in Paris at the time, so they got to meet a lot of VIPs.'

He picked up the picture, looking at it more closely. 'She was a very cool lady. That dress she's wearing is pretty radical for the – what, the sixties, is it?'

'Something like that. French *Vogue* called her a "fashion plate".' The term struck Dulcie as strange. 'But she kept all her dresses—'

He squinted suddenly.

'What is it?' she asked, seeing how he scrutinized the image.

'I'm not sure,' he said slowly.

'You're not sure …?' Clearly, it was something. He had the image almost up to the end of his nose.

He looked back at her. 'Her ring. I could just swear I've seen it somewhere.'

She frowned. How could he possibly recognize her grandmother's ring? She had a look at the picture too, peering closely at her grandmother's hand. She was wearing long black opera gloves to cover her bare arms and on her

left hand, a dramatically domed gold cocktail ring. It was certainly distinctive. ‘Oh, yes …’ she murmured. ‘I’ve never even noticed that before.’

But as she said the words, her eyes met his, and she suddenly knew that she had seen it too.

They both had.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Paris
25 October 1962

Everything was broken. There was nothing solid to hold onto anymore. People and places had dissolved from Lise's life in the wake of Valentin's death. He himself had been replaced within minutes, succession as vital in the diplomatic world as in the political and regal ones. Otto was the new acting ambassador until a permanent replacement was found, and she – despite kind words and sympathetic looks – had been gently hustled out of the grace-and-favour residence within days. With no family in the city, nor even a true friend, it had been an unexpected ally who stepped up.

'You must try to eat something,' Tatton said, nudging the bowl of soup towards her. 'He wouldn't want you suffering like this, you know he wouldn't.'

Lise turned her face away. The guilt was destroying her from the inside out. She couldn't erase the sight of his shoes; she couldn't block out the sound of the scream, which apparently had come from her. It woke her every night, sweating and thrashing, and she had taken to keeping a bucket by the bed so she could vomit into it without getting up.

She was a grieving widow, but not in the way Tatton thought, and his well-meaning consolations that she was 'still young enough to find love again' only made her feel worse. It was love that had brought this to bear: she had chosen her lover over her husband, never once thinking, never knowing, that the fallout of swapping a ring for a ring could be so catastrophic.

Leo too had been devastated. He had had no answers when she screamed down the telephone line that Valentin was dead. Their affair – and the need

to hide it, to save him – had brought about the death of her own husband.

For days afterwards she had refused to see him, letting the personal phone in her room ring off the hook, telling herself she would never see him again. But he had discovered Tatton's kindness in her hour of need and convinced the Englishman to allow him a courtesy visit, paying his respects. Tatton had thought nothing of it; everyone wanted to help. The diplomatic community, for all the political differences it bridged, was close, and Valentin had been much liked as well as respected. It was commonly felt that his young widow, beautiful and feted, must be protected until she was back on her feet. It had taken only one look in Leo's eyes as he stood in the doorway to know that his remorse was bone-deep, that she would forgive him long before he ever forgave himself. The tragedy, rather than splitting them apart, actually anchored their bond.

Around them, the world continued to turn ever faster. The Cuba situation had pivoted and it was no longer American hostages that had international attention. The entire world was standing on the very brink of disaster, with Soviet nuclear missiles now discovered to be within striking distance of the continental USA from Cuban soil. The American navy was blockading Cuba's ports and engaged in a maritime standoff with Soviet ships headed to Cuba, carrying further missile replenishments. The world was holding its breath to see who would blink first, and in the face of imminent nuclear war, the blow to Kennedy's reputation from the leak had been swiftly forgotten. No one cared anymore that he had been more concerned with elections than prisoners; they just wanted him to win this.

But somehow that only made it worse. Valentin's death – his integrity in the face of perceived shame – had been for nothing. His self-sacrifice had made him look guilty. By being honourable, he had only helped reinforce the narrative that he was the Soviet mole in the Swiss embassy. The world had moved on within weeks, but he was still dead and always would be.

Tatton sighed at her enduring listlessness. 'Dearest thing, I have to go out now. I wish I could stay, but you remember that beastly ceremony I told you about?' He rolled his eyes. 'I'll be back as soon as I can. You should try going out for a walk. You love walking! It's always been your escape. And then perhaps come in and run a bath. You'll feel all the better for it. Use my shaving soap as bubble bath if you like. Trumper's Lime, very … zesty.' He shrugged. Absolutely nothing in his apartment catered to women or

feminine taste. ‘I’ll bring back supper with me. Shouldn’t be any later than eight.’

He rose in his ceremonial dress: a red satin sash, some sort of medal pinned to his tailcoat … This had once, briefly, been her world. She had thought it fanciful, bordering on ridiculous, most of the time. Pretty gowns and good champagne; small talk with accented strangers … But it was deadly too. Smiling assassins moved among them.

She had been one such.

She watched as he crossed the small kitchen. He lived modestly despite his illustrious post. The apartment door closed behind him with a soft click; she was alone again, and she felt a wave of relief wash over her. His solicitations were earnest and well intended, but so exhausting. She didn’t deserve his goodness. If he only knew … She wanted to rot in her tears, brine in her own sweat. Let her be pickled in her own guilt and shame. Valentin’s death had shone too bright a spotlight on her, and she must be a widow to him in the same way that she had been his wife – a hologram of the real thing.

She was still sitting in the same place, in the same position, staring into space, when she heard the click of the door again a few minutes later. Leo slipped in, silent as a cat. There was a moment’s pause as he took in her wretchedness before he came over, stooping to wrap his arms around her from behind, pressing his face to her damp cheek.

‘We will survive this,’ he whispered. ‘I promise you.’

Lise closed her eyes, feeling safe again. She felt vulnerable now in a way she never had before; she had always taken for granted her ability to walk down a street and not have to listen for footsteps behind her. But now, with her husband dead and herself away from the guarded security of the embassy, she didn’t know who could be trusted … Paranoia had become her shadow. Someone knew what she had done that night. Their eyes had been following her, not the dazzling Nureyev, as she had slipped from the box, making sure she did what had been agreed.

And she had no way of knowing if she was still being watched now. The Soviets were the aggressors on the world stage with the Cuban situation, and she didn’t have a political allegiance to their communist cause. She wasn’t their ally, their friend; she had been forced into this as an act of love for Leo, and that made her connection with them tenuous. It made her expendable, didn’t it? A loose end to be tied up.

‘That was too close, Leo. Wags has only just gone.’

He kissed her cheek. ‘Don’t worry, I was careful. I was watching from across the street. I saw him being driven away. How long have we got?’

‘He said he’d be back by eight. But it could be sooner.’

‘I’ll leave by five, then, just to be sure …’

Their illicit meetings at his Marais apartment had now been replaced by his furtive visits here. She hadn’t been outside these four walls in weeks; now more than ever, there was no question of them being able to be seen together.

‘Have you eaten?’ He looked at the untouched bowl of soup. ‘Lise, you know you need to eat.’

Unenthusiastically, she picked up the spoon, watching as he crossed the kitchen and put some ground coffee beans in the Bialetti.

‘… So?’ she asked him. ‘Did you look into it?’

‘I did.’ He glanced over at her. ‘And I think it could work.’

‘You do?’ She felt a faint flutter of hope.

‘You were right. The old stables are still intact, although falling into disrepair. But that’s no bad thing if they look abandoned. And it’s a good spot – completely isolated, surrounded by fields.’ He ignited the gas flame under the pot. ‘… And if you’re right that the chapel was deconsecrated forty years ago, then no one has any reason to go down the path.’

‘I never saw anyone down there when I had the horses.’

‘What about fishermen?’

‘There are a hundred better spots to swim or fish than there,’ she shrugged. ‘But Leo … what about the isolation of it? Don’t you think that what makes it private also makes it dangerous? It’s exposed and completely alone.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ he nodded. ‘There are different protection systems I could use.’

‘You mean, like a gun?’

He shrugged, and she looked away. She hated guns. Her father had shotguns for sport and a handgun in the safe. She knew how to use one, of course; national service hadn’t been a choice, but she had never thought a day would come when she might need to use the skills she had acquired.

He poured the coffee and came and sat at the table with her. He reached for her hand, which was freezing, and tutted. ‘Eat.’

‘I can’t. I feel so sick.’

‘Just try. Just have a little.’

She obeyed as best she could, taking another sip of the now-tepid soup, but her stomach was in knots. They were in over their heads, both of them. He was an artist, not a dyed-in-the-wool spy. She knew he was terrified too.

The spoon fell from her trembling grasp as she began to cry again.

‘Look at me.’ He clasped her hand. ‘No one is coming after you.’

‘But Markov—’

‘It was a one-time thing, that was the deal.’

‘I don’t believe that!’

‘Think about it rationally, then – what good are you to him now? You’re a civilian again. We were only valuable to him for as long as you had access to Valentin’s office. Not to mention, it would be far too suspicious if something happened to you as well, after Valentin’s death. The Russians can’t afford that kind of scrutiny. Especially now.’

‘But …’ There was always a *but* – another problem, another question. Her mind went round in circles with it all the time. ‘We still don’t know who else was involved.’ Her voice quavered. ‘There was someone else working for them on the inside. A real mole, not Valentin. Whoever it was who put the film inside the ring knows what I did. They know me, and I have no idea who they might be.’

It was the question that kept her awake at night.

Leo reached forward and clasped her head, kissing her temples gently. ‘Lise, we stay protected by keeping our heads down and not asking questions. We kept our end of the bargain. Leave it at that.’

‘But if we disappear … won’t running makes us targets?’

‘No.’ He took her hand and pressed it to his lips, seeing the fear etched on her face. ‘Because it will be obvious to anyone that you would want to return to Switzerland after all this. You’ve suffered a terrible loss. Returning to your parents’ home makes perfect sense.’

She nodded, knowing he was right. Her family’s villa was the natural place for her to retreat to. Self-contained within its own estate, hidden from prying eyes; she would be safer there than anywhere. ‘I just wish we could stay there together.’

‘I do too, but things have changed. Appearances are everything, now more than ever. We need to create a clean break with the past and do what we’ve agreed, yes?’

She nodded, tears still spilling down her cheeks.

‘It won’t be forever,’ he soothed. ‘A day will come – sooner than you think – when they won’t care about us. Look at what’s happening right now. Everyone is watching the standoff, Kennedy versus Khrushchev. No one will notice if a nobody like me disappears. And you have a rock-solid alibi for leaving. It’s the right time to go.’ He kissed her temple again and rested his hand on her still-flat stomach. ‘We just have to be patient and hold our nerve. We’ll be together one day, all three of us.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lake Geneva
4 December 2026

‘The photos are just here,’ Dulcie said to Alé, her voice soft and the light dim as she reached for the box beside the card table.

She had brought them back up to her grandmother’s room after Tatton had failed to offer any illuminating insights past the possibility of her mother’s christening party. She couldn’t explain why she felt so drawn to them; only that it had become a meditation of sorts to sit here shuffling through them, catching glimpses of someone else’s lost world.

Anna sat discreetly in her chair on the other side of the bed, watching but passing no comment as yet another stranger came into this inner sanctum. But her pursed lips betrayed her disapproval.

‘Shouldn’t I wait outside?’ Alejandro whispered, aware of the nurse’s scrutiny as Dulcie scanned quickly through the photographs. She glanced back and saw him taking in the fragile scene, a softness – and sadness – growing in his eyes.

He looked over at Dulcie and she knew he saw it; he understood. The gravity of the situation here precluded some random hook-up, a whimsical holiday romance. She hadn’t been blowing him off, making up excuses. The timing really had been bad. And still was.

She looked away again. Nothing had been forgiven. This was just a temporary truce allowing him up here, as their mutual curiosity about the ring got the better of them.

‘It’s okay,’ she replied. ‘Granny’s sleeping, but I like to think that the sound of voices is comforting to her. They say hearing is the last faculty to go, and it makes me feel better to think she isn’t just lying here in silence. I

read to her, and we have music playing a lot of the time. This is her favourite song …'

The low notes of 'La Plage' played in the background, drifting like a breeze, Marie Laforêt's clear voice like a bird's soft trills in the dusk.

'You can help me look,' Dulcie said, making space for him at the table.

There were hundreds of photos to go through and they remained as she had left them, just a jumbled heap. It was difficult to see them clearly even by lamplight, but they both looked through the scattered images, vaguely knowing what they were looking for: a hand with a ring on it, manicured fingers splayed as if in admiration, the accoutrements of a lady's *toilette* in the background. It was also, she remembered now, the photograph Tatton had stopped at. Her grandmother had always loved interesting jewellery, he'd said. In fact, he'd said it twice.

'It has to be Granny's hand in the photo from your studio,' she murmured, as she thought on it harder now, sorting through the piles at speed. She could feel a quickening in her pulse, as if the past were shifting from under a fur coat. 'I mean, what are the chances of it being someone else? She's clearly wearing it in this one with Nureyev.' They'd brought the photo from the drawing room up to her grandmother's bedroom in order to compare the rings.

'Yeah.' He glanced at her grandmother's hand placed on the blanket, so tiny, the delicate skin now mottled with age spots so that it was speckled like a bird's egg; but the truth was, he had never looked at the photograph with the same interest as her. He had only a vague recollection of it, his sculptor's eye remembering the ring's sculptural form, but nothing more.

They turned over the last photograph. Dulcie looked back at him with wide eyes. 'Where is it?'

Alejandro shrugged. 'It wasn't in my pile.'

She felt a bolt of alarm arrow through her veins. 'We must have missed it,' she said. 'It might have stuck onto another one when they got wet. Let's check again.'

But several minutes later, they were still empty-handed.

'It's not here,' she murmured.

'Could it have fallen out?'

'… Yes … maybe.' The box had been all over the house – in the kitchen, the drawing room, her bedroom, in here … A simple draught could have

blown it under a bed or chair. And yet, of all the photographs to have been mislaid, it had been this one?

Alejandro watched her, seeing how she bit her lip, upset. ‘Let’s look through the others,’ he suggested. ‘These other random pictures in here … let’s see if they could be of her too?’ Most of the pictures were candids – indistinct flashes of scenes, almost deliberately opaque, as if obfuscation had been the point: capture a moment, but don’t reveal it. But where there was a person in the images, it was always fragments of a woman – her long hair blowing across the lens, an elegant wrist, the polished nub of a bare, freckled shoulder … Was it always the same woman, though? The black-and-white palette made it difficult to distinguish the details more closely.

She took a handful from the top of the pile again and perched on the side of the bed this time. ‘You can sit there,’ she mumbled, motioning to the chair beside the bed and card table.

‘Sure?’

‘We’re clearly going to be a while.’

They began sorting through for the third time in concentrated silence and she realized how strange it was, them sitting together like this. He could never have imagined, as he jumped in the Uber an hour earlier – so determined to talk her round, so confident he’d succeed that he’d brought his bag – that he would end up carrying furniture and rifling through old photographs he had already given away.

After a few minutes, his eyes flashed up to her. ‘… If it is your grandmother in these pictures, what would that mean?’

Dulcie bit her lip. How could she tell him the whole story – that she was grasping for threads from the tapestry of her family’s past?

‘Probably nothing at all. It just seems strange to me that there should be pictures of her, and of this house, in your studio. I know it’s not far from here, but … why were they over there?’

‘I wish I could tell you more, but I don’t know much about the place. I think it’s been an artist’s studio for at least fifty years now. Perhaps longer.’

He saw her stop shuffling the photos and stare at one. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m not sure … These shoes …’

She showed him the picture – a foot with a light-coloured patent leather shoe dangling off the toes, revealing a high arch. The picture was slightly blurred but there was a buckle across the front and a distinctive gold trim around the top of the low block heel. ‘Those seem familiar, although … I

could be reaching. I might be trying to make connections that aren't there …' She squinted, lost in memories. 'But … I feel like she did have some shoes like that.'

'Yeah?'

'I used to go into her wardrobe to dress up when I was little. I seem to think I loved those shoes because they were so shiny.'

'Would she still have them?'

'As if,' she scoffed.

'You never know. People didn't do fast fashion back then. And if she still had them when you were dressing up as a little girl – twenty years ago? – then she'd already had them for … what, forty years?' He shrugged. 'Why throw them away, then?'

He was right. Her grandmother had always been a magpie, a collector of beautiful things – this house was testament to that – but she had never been wasteful. Dulcie got up from the bed and went over to the wardrobes. There were two huge antique armoires either side of the fireplace and some more modern built-in closets along the left-hand wall, behind the door. She peered into one and was presented with rows of neatly stacked cashmere knits, silk blouses and, along the lower levels, dozens upon dozens of shoeboxes: Chanel, Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Chloé, Salvatore Ferragamo, Gucci …

She started opening the boxes, peering in. They were all still lying in their tissue paper, cedar-scented wooden shoe trees maintaining their shape. She shouldn't have been surprised. Helda had always been fastidious in her duties: the silver never less than sparkling, windows polished to a shine, furs packed in cloth bags. It stood to reason that her grandmother's shoe collection had been primped and preserved with the same care.

She had gone through dozens of boxes when she gave a small gasp that made Alé look up. He was still sifting through the pictures, seated in the chair beside the table. His legs were splayed, his body relaxed, the firelight casting shadows upon his deeply planed face. He seemed at once incongruous and at home in the historic, formal villa.

'No.' A slow smile spread across his face as he saw the excitement in her eyes. 'Don't say you've actually found them?'

His eyebrow raised in disbelief as she pulled out a Ferragamo shoe: tan patent leather, a buckle across the front, a gold trim around the top of the

block heel. ‘… This is not a coincidence,’ she gasped, bringing them back over with her and setting them down on the table.

‘I agree. That’s, what, three synchronicities now?’

They looked down at the pulled photographs connected to her grandmother: the terrace, the shoe, the ring being somewhere in the house; she would put Helda onto the hunt immediately. Nothing escaped her notice.

But still, the photographs didn’t tell a story; they only revealed snippets of her fashionable life, black-and-white aides-memoires. They didn’t explain why photographs of her grandmother had been hidden in a box in the roof of an old artist’s studio several miles from here.

Why was it that the more she found, the less she understood?

‘Madame?’ Anna asked, moving from her position on the other side of the bed.

Dulcie’s head snapped up. Her grandmother was awake and watching them.

Dulcie knew immediately that she was alert; there was a distinct difference in the quality of her gaze when she was lucid and when she was not.

‘You’re awake!’ Dulcie whispered.

‘… His voice … I heard his voice …’ Her grandmother’s voice was weak, but not tremulous. Not fading.

‘Oh … yes … this is my friend Alejandro.’ Dulcie looked over at him as he jumped up, standing before her grandmother respectfully.

‘It is an honour to meet you, madame,’ he said, bowing his head a little but not approaching the bed.

Her grandmother watched him. ‘The Spaniard … Beautiful eyes,’ she said, looking back at Dulcie. ‘Didn’t I say?’

‘You remember our talk the other day?’

Alejandro’s smile grew at the reminder that he been the topic of conversation.

‘I’ll go,’ he said, making to leave. ‘Give you your privacy.’

‘Stay,’ her grandmother said. ‘The accent … I knew a voice like that once …’

‘Madame, let’s move you up the pillows a little,’ Anna said, swooping in with her usual efficiency. ‘Is that comfortable?’

Her patient nodded, allowing herself to be moved. It was easy. She weighed so little now.

‘Take a little juice if you can.’ Anna held out the beaker.

Her grandmother looked at the nurse. ‘Actually … what I’d really like is some tea.’

‘Tea?’ Dulcie almost rocked from the request, as if she’d asked for a shot of tequila. How long had it been since she had had a hot drink? She looked questioningly at Anna, who gave an obliging nod.

Dulcie turned to the baby monitor on the side table and spoke into it. ‘Helda, could you bring up some tea for Granny, please? Sweet and weak.’

Anna was checking her grandmother’s pulse when she turned back. She seemed satisfied with her patient’s condition, but Dulcie already knew what this was: a surge, not a recovery. Another sign that the finish line was within sight now. Hopes had to be tempered, but it was still another chance to talk – to be together. She had thought they were all used up …

‘How are you feeling, Mémé?’ she whispered, clasping her hand.

Her grandmother smiled. ‘Tremendous … I’ve had the most vivid dreams.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘I dreamt I was back in Paris … with dear Valentin … and my darling Leo.’

‘Who?’

Her grandmother gave a light laugh that was more of a breath. ‘I even dreamt of Wags.’

‘Wags is here, Mémé.’

‘Oh, you know him too?’ Her eyes sparkled with delight, though she remained still. ‘… Isn’t he wonderful?’

‘You didn’t dream that. He’s here, in the house. He came to see you, do you remember? He sat with you the other day and you talked about old times.’

Her grandmother’s smile spread, a look of peace settling on her features. ‘He was always such a good man … A true friend … in my time of need.’

Dulcie hesitated. She didn’t want to lose a minute of this precious interaction with her grandmother – who knew how long it would last? – but the Englishman had come here with something important to tell her, and Dulcie had promised to give him that chance.

She spoke again into the baby monitor. ‘Helda, please could you also tell Mr Wagstaff he can come through? Granny is awake.’

She sat on the edge of the bed and took her grandmother’s hands lightly, but her grandmother was looking past her at the shoes now left on the card table.

‘… Am I going out?’

‘No.’ Dulcie smiled. ‘I was just being nosy. We found some old photographs we think belonged to you, a long time ago. I recognized those shoes in one of the pictures. And a ring too.’

‘Ring?’

‘I can’t find the photo now but it’s the same one as you’re wearing in this – you know, from the drawing room? It was taken at the ballet in Paris?’

She reached behind and picked up the picture of the ring on the splayed hand, showing it to her.

‘Mémé, you had the coolest stuff! How did I never notice before? … Do you remember it? It’s actually iconic. Do you still have it?’

‘… The ring.’ Her grandmother’s gaze had fixed onto the far wall, a shadow passing over her face.

There was a formal knock at the door.

‘Come in, Wags,’ she said. He had only had to travel from his bedroom, and at least this time he was being invited in.

He walked in, stooped but still dignified, wearing a jacket and tie as if at his Pall Mall gentleman’s club. He seemed disconcerted momentarily as he caught sight of Alejandro in the room, and she realized he would have had no warning that anyone else was here. It was becoming something of a party in her grandmother’s bedroom.

‘This is Alejandro Rivera, a friend of mine,’ she said formally, introducing them quickly. ‘Alé, Mr Wagstaff is a very old friend of Granny’s.’

‘Emphasis on the *very old*, I’m afraid,’ Wagstaff said, stopping briefly to shake the younger man’s hand.

He moved over to the bed, his expression brightening as he saw her grandmother’s alert state. Dulcie stepped back so that he could get closer to her and he perched carefully on the edge of the bed, taking the weight off. ‘And how is Paris’s most beautiful, today?’

‘We’re not in Paris anymore, Wags,’ her grandmother smiled, still not beyond flirting, even now as death hovered like a moth in the room.

‘Ah, but they mourn you still. It was never the same after you left.’

Another laugh that was no more than a breath escaped her. ‘I believe the city is still standing.’

‘A pitiful shadow, though, of its former self.’

Dulcie smiled, able to imagine their friendship, their repartee in years gone by.

‘I’m so glad you’re awake again, Lissy,’ he said, patting her hand and holding it in his.

‘I heard his voice,’ her grandmother murmured. ‘And I thought it was my darling Leo.’

Dulcie frowned. It was the second time in a matter of minutes her grandmother had said that, but her second husband’s name had been Hans Becker – and from everything she’d ever heard, he’d been no darling. ‘Who is this darling Leo?’

She hadn’t forgotten her grandmother’s bombshell remark the other day about the love of her life, even though she was married at the time … *Choosing him was the simplest decision of my life*. Trapped in an unhappy marriage with her second husband and heading for divorce, had the affair been a refuge for her?

There was a pause, then Tatton half turned to her. ‘I think she means Leo Santos,’ he said in a low voice.

‘Leo Santos,’ Dulcie repeated. It was familiar to her. ‘Why do I feel like I know that name?’

‘He was a Spanish artist, based in Paris at the same time we were there.’

Dulcie blinked. Paris changed the timeline of her grandmother’s love story. In Paris she had been married to Dulcie’s grandfather.

‘He was cultural attaché to the Spanish embassy—’

‘He was my love. My spy.’ The words dropped from her grandmother’s lips in hollow silhouette, but they landed with full-bodied force.

‘Spy?’

Shock reverberated through the room in silent soundwaves.

‘A common fantasy; I’m afraid all the wives wanted to be married to spies. Far more exciting than we dusty diplomats,’ Tatton said, laughing lightly, trying to come to her rescue. ‘Lissy, you were the ambassador’s wife. You were married to Valentin, remember?’

‘Yes. And I killed him.’ Her grandmother’s eyes closed for a moment, as if saying the words had come with immense physical effort. ‘I killed him.’

Dulcie felt the floor drop beneath her, confusion beginning to swirl. '… Granny? What are you saying?'

Wagstaff leaned forward and rubbed her hand gently. 'No. Valentin took his own life, do you remember?'

Dulcie looked sharply at him, feeling herself rocked again as the shocks kept on coming. How many guises would her grandfather's death come in? She had always been told it was an accident. Now it was 'killed' in one moment, suicide in the next?

She watched Wagstaff's face, hoping for an explanation. If her grandmother couldn't be relied upon as an accurate source, then he was the only one who could. But his attention was entirely on the fragile figure in the bed.

'… It was terribly sad. You came to live with me afterwards for a little while. I had that dreadful flat in the *huitìeme*. The wallpaper was ghastly, do you remember? Gave you headaches, you said.'

'No … It was Markov …' her grandmother insisted, trampling over his niceties. She was gripping his hand with whatever strength she had, her eyes trained upon him. 'Markov was behind it all.'

Dulcie frowned, growing ever more bewildered as the names kept coming. 'Markov? Who's that?'

There was a long pause, and then Wagstaff straightened his curved back.

'Wags?' Dulcie pressed, more urgently now. She felt a growing sense of alarm at her grandmother's words as the memories tumbled from her. She was lucid and alert. 'Who are these people? Who was Markov?'

He cleared his throat. 'General Markov was the military attaché at the Russian embassy in Paris. Same time as us. But this was all a very long time ago. They're all dead now—'

'They killed Leo,' her grandmother gasped, emotion coming into her voice. 'They killed him!'

Anna swooped in, checking her blood pressure on the monitor. 'Hush, now, madame. You mustn't get upset.'

'I think I should go,' Alejandro said in Dulcie's ear.

'No. Stay.' Dulcie gripped his arm instinctively. If his presence – or his voice, at least – had triggered memories, she wanted them to keep coming. She needed to hear them while she could. She didn't understand any of what her grandmother was talking about – spies and lovers, suicide, killing and being killed …

‘I know they did it,’ her grandmother murmured, moving her head from side to side in distress. ‘But I could never prove it … The glasses were there! They were the signal … I tried telling them, but no one would listen to me …’

‘Glasses? What does she mean, signal?’ Dulcie asked Wagstaff. Everything was becoming jumbled, incoherent.

He looked back at her, conflicted. ‘Leo Santos disappeared in the summer of sixty-three. No one knows exactly what happened to him. No body was ever found.’

‘So what Granny’s saying is true? He was a spy?’

‘… Yes, but—’

A tear was running down her grandmother’s cheek. ‘They should have killed me too. I killed Valentin. I did.’

‘Lissy, no – you didn’t kill anyone. There’s something I need to tell you.’ He looked at Dulcie with urgency. ‘Could you leave us, please?’

‘What?’ Dulcie stared at him in astonishment, astounded by the request. She had never once imagined that confiding his secret would require her absence. ‘… No! I’m … I’m not going to leave her when I don’t understand what’s happening here!’

‘Please. It’s vitally important I speak to her alone—’

‘Wags! What did they do?’ Her grandmother pleaded. ‘Don’t let me go, not knowing …’

Dulcie listened in horror. What exactly was he hiding from her grandmother? ‘Just say it, whatever it is you’ve come to say—’

‘I can’t,’ he insisted. ‘Not in front of others—’

‘That’s enough now,’ Anna barked, intervening as her grandmother began keening, her mouth wide as ghosts rose up, smothering her. ‘I’m going to have to ask you to leave.’

‘But—’

‘All of you.’ She pinned her gaze on Dulcie, clearly angry that she had brought this crowd in with her.

Helda was at the door too, unnoticed hitherto, holding the cup of tea but rooted to the spot as she surveyed the chaotic scene. How long had she been standing there?

‘Mémé,’ Dulcie gasped, feeling suddenly ashamed of what she had done, disturbing her grandmother’s fragile peace. She should never have let him in the house, much less this bedroom. She rushed forward to the bed as

Wagstaff reluctantly stepped back. ‘I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. We didn’t mean to upset you. Please don’t cry. It’s all okay.’

Helda sprang into action, herding the two men towards the door as Dulcie clasped her grandmother’s cool hand, pressing her fleshy cheek to bony knuckles, seeking forgiveness. ‘Please, can’t I stay with her?’ she pleaded. ‘I’ll sit quietly. I’ll read to her.’

‘You can come back in a while, once she’s settled,’ Anna said firmly. ‘Only you, though.’

‘But—’

‘In a while, Dulcie! This is too much.’

Her grandmother looked back at her, her anguish beginning to fall away along with the light in her eyes. She was sinking again into the fog.

‘I’ll come back,’ Dulcie whispered, leaning over and kissing her cheek. ‘Just you and me, Mémé.’

Her grandmother’s fingers gripped weakly against her own. ‘I should never have worn it …’ she whispered, the words like mere rags. ‘If I had never worn it, everything would have been different.’

‘Worn what?’

‘Now, please, Dulcie,’ Anna insisted, walking around the bed and taking her by the arm.

‘Worn what, Mémé?’ she asked as she was pulled to standing.

‘The ring—’

‘She needs to rest!’ Anna insisted. ‘I’ll call you back in once she’s settled.’

Dulcie was all but pushed out of the dim room and she stumbled into the hall, overcome by how quickly everything had descended into chaos. Alejandro was leaning against the wall, talking in low voices with Wagstaff, but he straightened up at the sight of her, his eyes filled with concern. Without a word, leaving the Englishman mid-sentence, he came over and wrapped his arms around her.

She realized she was trembling.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, his words hot in her hair.

She nodded, her eyes closing at the contact, but she knew she wasn’t. What had just happened in there? Her grandfather had died by suicide? Her grandmother had loved a spy? She had killed her own husband? … None of it made any sense. What was real and what wasn’t?

‘I’m so terribly sorry, Dulcie. This is most distressing,’ Wagstaff said, looking stricken too. ‘I didn’t mean to make things worse.’

Alejandro stepped back, releasing her as he felt her body stiffen.

‘But you did, Wags … Those things she said …’ Her tone was accusing, her eyes cold. All this was his fault. His presence here was muddying the waters and making things even more unpredictable in her grandmother’s already fractured mind.

‘She’s confused. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.’

‘So, then, my grandfather didn’t kill himself?’ she challenged.

Wagstaff hesitated. ‘No; he did—’

Her hands flew to her mouth, her head shaking side to side. How could she only be hearing this now? ‘My God.’

‘It was a … tragic situation. I’m sure your family were just trying to protect you … I feel dreadful you didn’t know, but I didn’t feel it was my place to be the one to tell you. I … I’m so sorry.’ He put a hand to the wall suddenly, as if to steady himself, and she felt a wave of guilt for being harsh with him. The man, for all his mental acuity, was nonetheless frail.

She bit her tongue, conflicted again. Her feelings about him could never quite land. She liked him, but she just didn’t trust him.

She caught her breath and held it for a moment, calming herself. Freaking out would help no one.

‘No,’ she muttered. ‘You’re right, Wags. It’s not your fault – and it wasn’t for you to be the one to tell me. My family should have told me long before now. It was just a shock, that’s all. A lot to take in.’ She looked back at him again. ‘But I do think we should talk about what it is you’ve come to say. You saw Granny’s distress just now. She’s incredibly fragile. We can’t have a repeat of that scene in there.’

He stared at the ground for a few moments. ‘You’re right, of course,’ he nodded. ‘I see that now. I came with the best of intentions. I thought it would help, but I’m sorry if I have only made things worse.’

‘Well, she’s resting now. Anna will always see to it that there’s no harm done, but—’

‘Might we do it in the morning?’ he asked, pressing his palm to the wall again, his arm trembling slightly. He looked close to collapse himself.

‘… Of course.’ Frustration nibbled at her shadow, but she managed a smile. ‘Let’s get you back to your room so you can lie down.’

‘Thank you.’ He was pale and drawn. Alejandro offered his arm, which the Englishman accepted gratefully as they walked down the hall. They stopped outside his bedroom door, and he gave another tired smile. ‘Thank you,’ he said again.

‘Have you eaten?’ Dulcie asked.

‘No, but—’

‘I’ll get Helda to bring you up a tray. You must keep your strength up,’ she insisted.

‘… That’s most kind … Well, goodnight, then.’

His bedroom door closed and she and Alejandro continued downstairs. The Christmas tree, still unadorned, dominated the double-height space so that its tip was visible even from the landing. The scent of pine carried in the air, the stair bannisters now thickly topped with evergreen garlands, the fire crackling quietly and the dark windowpanes dashed and speckled with whirling snowflakes outside. None of the extra Christmas decorations had yet been put up – not the red velvet ribbons nor the white taper candles – and it felt rather as if the forest had crept into the house and settled here, in from the cold.

Dulcie wasn’t sure what to say now they were alone. She felt drained and embarrassed by everything that had just unfolded in front of him.

‘I feel like what happened in there was my fault,’ Alejandro said, breaking the silence as they crossed the hall. ‘I’m a stranger. I shouldn’t have been in there. It was too much for her.’

‘No—’

‘But my accent obviously upset her.’

‘It wasn’t you, per se. But I am worried about her peace of mind … There’s clearly something troubling her. I never knew about even half of those things.’

He nodded, giving her a sorrowful look.

Her phone buzzed with a message and she clicked on it without thinking; it had become second nature to be on call, even while she was in the house.

‘*We look good together*,’ was written below a photograph of her and Hugh, standing on Mont Blanc earlier when they had stopped for lunch. He had asked Arnaud to take a picture but she’d forgotten all about it. Was that really from today? The scenarios didn’t feel stitched together. ‘*Can’t wait to see you again. I’ll call.*’

She swallowed, pocketing the phone quickly, but not before Alejandro had seen it too. He inhaled sharply and looked away. ‘Listen, I’m going to go.’

She gasped as she remembered suddenly. ‘Oh God, your Uber – I’m so sorry.’ In all the chaos, she’d completely forgotten about it.

‘Yeah …’ He winced, and she realized from his apologetic expression that he’d never ordered another one. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I should never have come over here like this. I was trying to make things good between us, but clearly you’ve got much bigger things to deal with than an idiot like me.’

‘You’re not an idiot,’ she sighed, standing on the mat in her socks as he put a hand to the latch and opened the door. The cold night air whistled in, making them both brace. ‘Jesus,’ she shivered, wrapping her arms around her and realizing she was still in just her base layers.

‘You go in. I’ll wait for the driver outside,’ he said, pulling out his phone and bringing up the app as he stepped out.

‘But where will you stay?’

‘I’ll get a hotel room. It’s fine.’

She watched as the screen shone a bright light onto his face, his breath hanging in small clouds in the cold air as he typed. ‘No, just … stay here.’ Her earlier anger with him had long since dissipated, and she could still feel the warmth of his hug around her upstairs just now; how easy it had been to lean into him.

‘Don’t worry about me, Dulcie.’

‘I’m not worried about you. But it’s ridiculous you trying to find a hotel room in these conditions when there’s a flat right here, sitting empty.’

He shrugged. ‘I’ll just go to the hotel I stayed at last night.’

‘You were in a hotel last night?’ She had assumed he’d stayed at Martina’s. The woman had very clearly implied …

Implied or lied?

He glanced up. ‘Yeah. It was why I didn’t come here yesterday. I’d already paid, so … it seemed a waste of a perfectly good Continental breakfast.’ He flashed her that devastating smile again.

‘But then … why take me up on the offer to stay here, if you already had somewhere?’

‘Why do you think?’

She looked back at him, seeing the heat in his eyes, but he blinked in the next moment, looking away again.

He cleared his throat. ‘But, uh, that was before I realized … I mean, I knew about the situation here, obviously; you told me enough times. I just didn’t really get the … seriousness of it till now. You’re dealing with so much. It’s not right, me being here too.’

‘It’s no more wrong than Wagstaff being here,’ she muttered.

‘He’s your grandmother’s friend, at least. I’m the guy who made her cry.’

‘I’ve told you, that wasn’t your fault.’

‘So you’re saying she would have reacted the same to any random Spanish dude standing in her bedroom?’ he joked.

She smiled. ‘Look, just stay tonight, okay? You’re already here, and Helda’s prepared everything over there for you. She’ll be cross if it was for nothing.’

He regarded her for a moment. ‘Well, I wouldn’t want to make her cross,’ he said finally, stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets. ‘Okay, thanks. I’ll stay for tonight, then.’

She glanced out from the doorway, able to see his duffel bag still sitting by the garage doors. ‘I’ll get some boots on and I’ll show you—’

‘No need,’ he said, stopping her. ‘I can find my way to the garage. It’s cold out and, well … you’re not dressed for tours.’

She laughed. ‘There is that.’

‘Yeah.’ He hesitated for a moment, watching her as if he were soaking her in, and she knew that despite their clashes and stubbornness and Hugh and Martina, on a normal night this would have been the moment. The perfect moment. They were alone in the dark, and he was here for one night only … She could feel the tension crackling between them, a force field magnetizing them together in spite of everything – and everyone – holding them apart. On a normal night, none of it would have mattered.

But all of this was as far from normal as it was possible to get.

‘Well, goodnight, then,’ he said.

She watched him cross the courtyard, past the fountain where the water flow had slowed to a trickle, towards the garage block. So near. So far.

‘Night, Alé,’ she whispered into the darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lake Geneva
31 May 1963

Lise crossed the bedroom floor and stood by the windows, looking out over the lake. Sunlight was catching like golden threads on the ripples, dozens of yachts clipping turns on the water, their white sails hoisted like sheets and billowing in the light breeze. Summer was on the wing; she could hear it in the birdsong and smell it in the scent of honeysuckle climbing around her window.

Immediately below her the terrace lawn had been set up with dozens of round tables double-skirted in pink and white tablecloths, hydrangeas frothing from low glass bowls in the centre of each one, and dainty chairs tied with green silk ribbons. Maids in black dresses with white collars moved around one another in fluid arcs like the wooden figures in a Swiss clock, putting out place settings and polished glasses. Church candles stood between the balusters along the stone balustrade and, for a dash of whimsy, clutches of balloons were tied round the hands of the Roman goddess statues that punctuated the semicircular wall overlooking the vineyard.

'*Chérie?*'

She turned to find her mother coming in, elegant in a hat, gloves and stiff dove-grey sateen.

'Are you ready?'

'Of course,' Lise replied, walking over to the bed and picking up her hat, a modest pillbox.

Her mother came and watched her reflection in the mirror as she secured it quickly with a few pins. 'You've kept your figure,' she said admiringly,

smoothing a crease on Lise's salmon-pink dress coat. '… Of course, I was always lucky that way after my babies too.'

Lise reached for her gloves. 'Has everyone arrived?'

'Yes. And Georges is waiting outside for us.'

'Okay.' She took a deep breath, feeling her nerves pitch. Just the next hour to get through, and then one hundred of her closest friends for lunch afterwards. Phase one of Happy Ever After was in play.

Mother and daughter walked downstairs together and Lise felt, again, the familiar pang of regret that she hadn't trodden these steps in her wedding dress as her mother had always dreamt. Instead she and Valentin had eloped, strangers pulled from the street bearing witness to what had proved to be a sham marriage. It turned out they had all been robbed of a genuine experience.

'Ah, there she is.' Her father turned from his spot on the rug in front of the fireplace. 'My, don't you both look so beautiful,' he said proudly. 'Doesn't Mama look pretty?'

Lise walked over and gazed down at her baby daughter in his arms. Only two weeks old, she still had a thick thatch of dark hair, and limpid eyes like a baby seal's. She had arrived a few weeks early – 'stress', everyone said – and the birth had been long and difficult, but Lise had loved her from the first instant. She was the spitting image of her father.

'The nanny just changed her, so she's all fresh, I'm told,' Lise's father said, gladly handing her over. He would have no idea what to do if his granddaughter's nappy wasn't fresh.

'Well, let's hope it stays that way for the next forty minutes at least,' Lise murmured.

They walked out into the courtyard, where their driver, Georges – all of eighteen years old – was waiting with the Bentley. He opened the door, looking smart in his uniform, and the family settled along the back seat.

Lise cradled her child, swaddled in the blanket, as they cruised down the wide roads. Her leg jigged anxiously and she felt unaccountably nervous. During her time in Paris it had been routine to host events for two, three, even five hundred guests at a time, sometimes several times a week; there had been a guest list of eight hundred for the Red Cross gala, from which she had had to step back as she mourned her husband. But since her self-imposed retreat, her world had shrunk to just a very few people: her parents and the house staff.

The young chauffeur brought the car to a gentle stop outside the church and she was helped out, still carrying the baby. She felt Valentin's absence all the time, but here, especially, it was glaring. Her parents seemed to feel it too, flanking her protectively as they walked up to the doors together. Heads turned, sympathetic faces trained upon her as she was glimpsed for the first time in months. She had left Paris a young widow, pregnant and in mourning – it had been a pitiable end to a summer in which she and her husband had blazed through the City of Light like a comet.

But now that she was a mother, the page had turned. Two seasons had passed and life was continuing on. The red buttons hadn't been pushed after all. And Valentin's shadow was growing ever shorter.

With her parents, she walked down to the front of the church, where the minister was waiting in his ceremonial gown. There were many faces in this crowd from her old life, eager to see what was happening next for her. She had been surprised at just how much of a draw she still exerted, even without the cachet of an embassy address – although Villa Mirelle could hold its own on that score. Almost everyone had RSVP'd yes.

They gathered at the font, family and godparents. If Eva had been surprised to be asked, she hid it well, masking her awkwardness about their brief estrangement with a joyous pretence that it had never happened.

The minister held out his arms to take the child, but Lise kissed her daughter's tiny face first: a public act of devotion, knowing that one person was watching from the congregation more intently than anyone else. So near to them – and yet still too far.

The baby protested with tiny mewls as holy water was splashed onto her head, prayers offered up in her name and her soul blessed. Lise watched with a pounding heart. After her rocky start in life, her daughter would need all the luck she could get.

'It was a beautiful service,' Sylvie said, looking more ready to hold a press briefing than a baby in her navy suit.

'It was so good of you to come all this way to celebrate with us,' Lise replied. They were back at the villa, everyone milling on the terrace lawn, a string quartet playing Vivaldi in the background.

'Well, I must confess, I was perhaps not as selfless as you may think. I haven't come from Paris – I was posted back to Geneva two months ago.'

'Geneva? Sylvie, I didn't know! Is this a promotion?'

The woman beamed. ‘I am now Deputy Management Office.’

‘What an achievement!’ Lise smiled. ‘Valentin would have loved that for you.’

‘Actually, it was he who put my name in the hat for the position.’

Lise nodded. ‘… Well, somewhere he’s smiling. I just know it.’

‘I hope so.’ Her former assistant regarded her. ‘And you? How have you been? I’ve thought about you a lot.’

‘You always were so kind to me,’ Lise smiled. ‘And I’m sorry I haven’t been better at staying in touch.’

‘No! You’ve had a lot to deal with.’

‘Yes. Well, I … I won’t pretend it’s been an easy time, but coming home and living with my parents has been very healing. And of course, it’s made all the difference not being alone with the baby. I suppose in that way, I’ve been lucky.’

‘You’ve made the best of a very bad hand,’ Sylvie said. ‘But you always were stronger than people gave you credit for. It’s good to see you back on your feet.’

Her eyes lifted to someone approaching, and Lise half turned to find Tatton Wagstaff holding out a drink.

‘Ah,’ she smiled, visibly relaxing. He had always been the person to put her at ease in these big gatherings. ‘Just the thing. Thank you.’

‘Virgin margarita,’ Wagstaff replied, greeting Sylvie with his usual charm. ‘M’elle Allard.’

‘Mr Wagstaff,’ she smiled. ‘How lovely to see you. It’s been a while.’

‘You are both much missed in Paris. Won’t you come back? It’s terribly dull these days. Otto’s become even more tightly laced into his corsets since you left.’

Sylvie smiled. ‘I wish I could. Geneva is certainly a lot less fun. So many meetings.’

‘Meetings! Memos!’ he cried, rolling his eyes. ‘All that chatter. I’ve always believed the art of diplomacy is to say nothing, especially when speaking.’

Lise giggled. She had missed his wit and resolved to be better at staying in contact with him too, now that she was settled here and through the worst.

Wagstaff’s eyes caught on something behind her and he raised his arm in the air suddenly, snapping his fingers. ‘Oh – and you’ll never guess who I

ran into in town earlier?'

Lise gave him a quizzical look. 'Who?'

'Who was always the most entertaining plus-one?' His eyes sparkled with mischief on the word *entertaining*.

'… Who?' she repeated.

Wags reached into the crowd, pulling Leo over to them, his familiar, handsome face still making her catch her breath, even now.

'Señor Santos,' she exclaimed, politely offering her hand. 'I'm so delighted you were able to join us.' She felt his thumb rub along the side of her hand, a hidden touch in plain sight.

'I hope you don't mind my gatecrashing the christening?'

'I insisted, I'm afraid,' Wagstaff said comically, speaking in an exaggerated manner from the corner of his mouth.

Lise laughed lightly. 'Not at all, I'm delighted. It's a wonderful surprise to see you again. What brings you to Geneva?'

'I've been staying with an old friend in Lausanne and decided to visit the lake for lunch before I leave later. I ran into Monsieur Wagstaff outside the station this morning.'

'Extraordinary stroke of good fortune, wouldn't you say?' Wags beamed, looking at her. She smiled back, but there was nothing extraordinary about it. She had specifically asked him which train he would be taking to get here, and Leo had made sure to make himself conspicuous as he purchased a map on the station concourse.

'I'm glad to see you are faring well, madame,' Leo said, following their script almost to the word. 'These have been difficult months you have had to endure.'

Valentin's memory shimmered between them all.

'Thank you,' she said graciously. 'I'm beginning to feel a little more like myself. Babies never give you a minute, of course. Life must go on.'

'Yes, it must,' he agreed as their eyes locked.

Wagstaff looked between them interestedly. 'I say, do you sail?' he asked the Spaniard after a moment.

'Yes.'

He looked thoughtful. 'I'm thinking about entering into the Bol d'Or next month … Can't decide.'

'It's a very social affair,' Sylvie said. 'Just your bag, *non*?'

Wagstaff shrugged but looked pleased. 'Do you sail?' he asked her.

‘Well enough,’ Sylvie replied.

‘Perhaps we should all crew together: British, Spanish, Swiss … Although we’d need a good name, something to represent the diplomatic corps.’

‘The Corpses?’ Sylvie suggested.

Wagstaff laughed loudly; he rarely broke into open laughter. ‘What say you, Señor Santos? Could we persuade you to join the team?’

‘I fear it would be difficult. I’m no longer in Paris.’

The Englishman hitched up an eyebrow. ‘Neither is the lake.’

Santos grinned. ‘I meant, I have left the embassy – and the diplomatic world – behind me.’

‘Really?’ Wagstaff looked surprised. ‘I assumed you’d just gone on secondment somewhere.’

‘Me too. I had no idea,’ Sylvie said. ‘You didn’t like diplomatic life?’

Leo shook his head, and Lise saw the shadow cross his face. ‘No. Too much duplicity and doublespeak for me. I’m a simple man, not built for backstabbing.’

A surprised silence bloomed at the unexpected comment, the flash of bitterness disrupting the conviviality of their social discourse. Lise stiffened slightly, trying to catch his eye.

‘Good lord, what exactly was happening in the Spanish embassy?’ Tatton quipped. ‘It’s been deathly dull our way. Duelling over the paper clips is as dastardly as it gets in the British HQ.’

‘The Americans should be so lucky,’ Sylvie said with a sly look, her voice dropped low. ‘There’s never a moment when they’re *not* duelling someone or other.’

Leo rolled his eyes, and Lise felt herself hold her breath as the conversation suddenly wandered into dangerous territory. Valentin’s death had hardened him in these intervening months. She knew he was riddled with guilt that his attempt to save himself from Markov betraying him to the BPS had come at the cost of another man’s life. He derided himself for ever believing that in the world of espionage, swapping a ring was just swapping a ring and not, of course, the illicit transfer of secrets, a betrayal of international security with life and death consequences. At a single stroke he had involved her, implicated Valentin and worst of all, made a target of his baby daughter, who was now another secret to be leveraged against him.

While she tended the baby in the comfort and safety of Villa Mirelle, Leo spent his long hours alone, hiding out in the old stables and ruminating on the devastating ripple effects of one desperate decision. He painted almost all the time and she could see his suffering from the dark moons cradling his eyes, a dolorous quality coming through in his work – lonesome figures trudging through hostile tundra. Isolated. Alone. Outcast.

She had tried reminding him – as she reminded herself – of all the ways they had had no choice; of the fact that they never could have known the choice Valentin would make that day. But he wouldn't forgive himself his naivety and a bitterness was settling in him by degrees. Everyone had become the enemy. He had never been pro-Soviet but now he had become anti-American too, as if JFK himself had forced the memo into his hand.

Poor Sylvie had no idea that she had kicked a hornets' nest.

'Kennedy's ego is out of control since Cuba,' Leo shrugged. 'Everyone thinks he's the hero of the free world, but if the public had any idea of the concessions he made in Turk—'

'Yes, well,' Tatton said quickly, clearing his throat and saving Leo from any champagne-fuelled indiscretion as he patted his arm in friendly warning. Whatever confidences Leo was privy to, they had to remain that way. 'No milk was spilled, that's the main thing.'

It was a gentle rebuke and Lise exhaled slowly as Leo looked over at her, suddenly realizing his misstep.

'So if you're not in Paris, where are you living now?' Sylvie asked with her usual diplomatic mildness as she moved the conversation on. She was as skilled as Otto at keeping the peace.

'Rotterdam. Working privately, as a humble artist,' Leo replied, back on script.

'Well, now, I never did get a chance to see your work, but I'm sure there's nothing humble about it, Señor Santos,' Lise said. She looked at Wagstaff. 'Did you ever get to see it, Wags?'

'Sadly not. Really ought to rectify that, though. I'll come over for lunch one day and you can show me your studio.'

'You'd come all the way to Rotterdam for lunch?' Santos asked, bemused. There was, of course, no studio there.

'I went all the way to Mombasa once for a gin and tonic. And it was well worth it, I can tell you. Are you working on a new exhibition? I seem to

recall a conversation in which you said you were interested in … white?' His eyes glittered with mischief.

Leo looked abashed. 'I fear I was more pretentious back then … No. I'm currently doing some cityscapes. Working with all the colours of the rainbow.' Another lie.

'Oh well, then I'd love to see them when they're ready. I might be better able to understand those.' Lise smiled self-deprecatingly, happy to make herself the butt of the joke as they moved away from politics.

'I will make sure you are sent an invitation. But of course, if …' His voice faded out.

'If …?' she asked.

'If you should ever find yourself in Rotterdam before then, please do look me up. I'm in the directory. Perhaps I could take you to lunch?'

'Does one ever just find oneself in Rotterdam?' Wagstaff joked, but it was missed.

'That would be lovely,' Lise smiled. 'Although I fear Rotterdam may be slightly out of my perimeter of travel now, with the baby.'

There was a disappointed pause. 'Oh, yes,' Leo nodded.

Wagstaff's eyes slid between the two of them, then to Sylvie, who was also looking on with interest.

'Unless of course you were in Geneva, say for a regatta …' Wagstaff suggested, elbowing Leo in the ribs. 'One might also have lunch there?'

Santos grinned at the overt matchmaking, but his eyes were still on Lise. 'I could certainly come back to Geneva for that.'

'Well, then … lunch would be lovely,' she replied. 'If you're sure you'd have time.'

'Oh, yes. I'm always hungry,' he said earnestly.

Wagstaff smiled into his drink; Sylvie still watching with interest.

Lise saw Eva walking past and called her over, clutching her arm. 'Have you met Señor Santos? Leo's an artist.'

'*Enchanté*,' Eva said with a winning smile.

'Eva and I used to compete on the equestrian circuit together,' Lise explained to him, as if he didn't know the background of the woman who was now godmother to his child.

'You ride too?' Sylvie asked Eva.

'Oh, Lise and I practically grew up on horseback together! As little girls we would spend our summers making jumps in the field by your stables –

do you remember, down by the lake?'

'Mm-hm.' Lise nodded, swallowing down her drink and looking away; she didn't want to encourage any reminiscences about that.

'And then twelve years later, we were roommates at the Rome Olympics,' Eva shrugged.

'Which discipline?' Sylvie asked.

'Eventing. We took home team silver.'

'Do you still ride?'

'Not at the moment. My husband travels a lot, and Paris is not conducive to horses. But in a few years, if we move out of the city, he shall have to be ready. I will want a whole stable of thoroughbreds!'

'An expensive hobby, for sure,' Leo replied. Lise took a small step back. 'Will you excuse me? I really must check on the baby.'

She didn't want to move off, but now the reintroduction had been made and a tentative lunch date publicly set, she must stick to the plan. Everything had to look natural and unforced between them.

'I'll catch up with you again later, I hope,' she said, smiling at them all, but looking pointedly at Leo for a moment longer than everyone else.

She walked away feeling his eyes on her back, as she had after their very first meeting, when he had decided she was married to the wrong man. When he had determined, there and then, to make her his wife instead.

And in spite of everything else that had outwardly changed in their lives since then – the tragedy and fear and chaos – that hadn't faltered, and it never would. Because they belonged to one another, and soon they would be able to show the world.

They were on their way to becoming a family at last.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lake Geneva
5 December 2026

Her eyes flew open.

Dulcie stared into the darkness, aware that her heart was pounding. Her body was on high alert before her brain had caught up. For several seconds she didn't stir, eyes and ears straining for a trace of whatever it was that had alerted her. She felt her animal instincts come to the fore, that sense of being watched raising the hairs on her neck as she waited for a telltale sound, something to betray the watcher.

A minute ticked past, her own pulse the clock, the sound of blood rushing through her ears. But nothing came.

She reached over and switched on the bedside lamp. Light cascaded through the room, presenting everything in order and exactly as she had left it when her eyes had closed a few hours earlier. She propped herself up on her elbow, feeling her nerves settle, though her brain was still probing questions. Why was she awake?

She checked the time – 3.13 a.m.

Then she saw it. The notification. Another WhatsApp from Hugh. It was ten in the morning in Hong Kong. She drew it down without clicking on it; the last thing she needed was a conversation in the dead of night. It was a selfie of him walking past the high-rises, looking fresh in his suit. 'You'd like it here.'

She let the phone drop from her hand with a sigh and lay there, staring at the ceiling for a few moments. It was neither there that she wanted to be, nor him whom she wanted to be with. She thought of Alejandro just across the way from here. Was he asleep?

She threw off the covers and walked out into the darkened hall, crossing into the yellow bedroom opposite. It had been her mother's room when she was a girl and still had all her childhood books on the shelves. Molly, the teddy, would have been on the bed too if not for having long ago been moved to Dulcie's.

She went to the window and looked out. Across the snowy courtyard, the lights were on in the garage flat.

He was still awake.

What he was doing over there to be still awake at this hour? Could he too, like her, not sleep? Or had he fallen asleep with the lights on? She waited for a sign he was up but no shadows flickered across the light.

She moved away from the window and back into the darkness. But she knew she couldn't go back to sleep – not now – and she stood in the corridor, in the plush, velvety silence, listening to the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock coming from the reception hall. All the bedroom doors were ajar, moonlight falling through some in narrow shafts; but not her grandmother's at the far end of the hall, the thick curtains drawn. Dulcie had gone back to sit with her after Alejandro had left, but her grandmother hadn't woken again and she had done nothing but sit with her, stroking her hand as Marie Laforêt sang to them both.

Might she be awake now? She slept all day, but what if she had fleeting moments of wakefulness, blinking into the darkness? Who would ever know? Even Anna had to sleep.

She tiptoed down to the master suite and peered around the door. The fire had gone out, so the warm, flickering light that enlivened the room by day was snuffed out. Sure enough, Anna was fast asleep in the single truckle bed that she put up in the middle of the room each night. She had been tireless these past few weeks; ever since Dulcie's grandmother had entered this 'end stage', she had taken over from the agency nurses who used to do the night shifts on rotation and covered them herself, knowing she comforted her patient in a way that they didn't. This twenty-four-hour care was only possible given her patient's almost comatose state, ensuring the nurse managed a decent sleep most nights.

Dulcie went over to the bed, quiet as a ghost.

'Mémé?' she whispered. 'It's just me … Dulcie.'

Nothing.

She climbed onto the bed and curled against her grandmother, as she had when she was little. Sleepovers had been one of their favourite things to do together: Georges would bring up the television from the playroom and set it on a table; Helda, a tray of sweets and popcorn and a foaming jug of hot chocolate. Then the two of them would watch Audrey Hepburn films in bed. Their favourite was *Charade*, for the outfits and all the twists and turns.

Dulcie pulled a blanket over her body and looked over at her grandmother, stroking her hand and watching her sleep; she looked serene and untroubled now by the memories that had haunted her when she was awake earlier. Dulcie had so many questions, more than she had ever had before: about her grandfather's suicide, Leo the spy, her regrets about the ring … But even if she couldn't have answers, Dulcie wished they could just talk among themselves. 'Girl talk', her grandmother had always said, folding herself into the sofa cushions as Dulcie spilled a school term's worth of gossip.

But those days were gone, and they were never coming back. The guillotine was already swinging, ready to cleave her from her childhood forever, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She felt the sadness settle upon her like a weight, shadows closing in.

'Mémé, I'm here, if you wake up,' she whispered, her fingers closing around the dainty hand. 'If you want to talk … Don't let me sleep … I'm here.'

'Dulcie, wake up.'

She felt a hand upon her shoulder, warm and comforting, and even before she opened her eyes, she knew.

She could feel it in the silence of the room, the stillness on the bed.

For a few seconds, she disobeyed the order. If she didn't open her eyes, it could be denied. Or at least delayed … But the light was already pressing against her eyelids from one side, tears from the other, and she looked up at the nurse, pleading with her to say something – anything – else, other than —

'I'm sorry, Dulcie. She passed in her sleep.'

Dulcie felt that terrible, familiar hollowness open up inside her as she pushed herself up to sitting, her head hanging like a broken daffodil. She couldn't … Only her eyes lifted, her gaze going straight to the windows, at

the snow falling prettily outside, the lake a chiffon grey today. A new day was already dawning, just without Lise Merian-Erlach-Becker in it.

'… What happened?' Her voice sounded unlike itself. Stripped back and weak.

'I woke at six and checked on her. She had already gone. She wouldn't have suffered.'

Dulcie caught her breath. 'When do you … what time …?' She could hardly ask the question and a sudden sob juddered in her chest. She had come in here just after three. Had it already happened by then? Was that what had woken her? Had her instincts felt it, death landing at last? Had her grandmother already gone when she had curled up here in the moonlight, confusing death for sleep?

'I think it was likely around four.' Anna spoke carefully. Dulcie knew there were ways of estimating these things.

'Really?' The question, coddling hope, was a whisper. So then she had been here, just in time? Her grandmother hadn't been alone; she had slipped away as Dulcie held her hand …

Yes. Her hand … It had still been warm, she realized. That was something, wasn't it? It had to be something.

She looked then at the figure in the bed, seeing the change immediately. The lifeblood that had still lightly coloured her grandmother's sunken cheeks yesterday had gone. Even her frightened eyes and salty tears had been proof of life. Now she was like a porcelain figurine: beautiful, pristine and empty. After weeks of oscillation, she had finally gone and taken her stories with her; all her secrets. There would be no answers forthcoming, no more revelations either.

'I'll give you some privacy,' Anna said, seeing her stricken response and walking quietly out of the room.

Dulcie stayed motionless on the bed. It felt like if she put a foot to the floor, the ground beneath her would break apart. It was all coming back now, the dreadful familiarity of death – the horror of her parents' accident: being called in to the headmistress's office, that look that said everything before words, the ringing silence in her head, a plummeting feeling in her stomach as if she were breaking down from the inside. She had looked into the abyss that day, and it had stared right back at her. Then her grandmother had arrived on the first flight over, and the execution had been stayed …

But it had always been coming down the tracks, this moment, and she had been tied to the rails, unable to get out of the way.

She swallowed, daring herself to reach out and hold her grandmother's hand a final time, but she was so scared of death's cool touch. It was what had haunted her most, her warm, vivacious parents, lying there side by side in the viewing room, silent and cold.

Her hand fell short, resting on the covers.

'So this is really it, Mémé?' she whispered. 'Our goodbye?'

She felt the emptiness of the room, as if she too was not a living thing within it; her heartbeat suspended.

'I'll miss you … I already miss you. More than you could possibly imagine.' Her voice was tiny, curled up like a dormouse. 'I know you know you were never just a grandmother to m—'

She fell quiet. Nothing she could say was enough, and her mind was beginning to race, panic pushing past the shock now. She could feel herself growing smaller, the world mushrooming around her, swallowing her up.

'… I thought we had more time, though. I really did!' she said, and a cry escaped her as she heard how foolish it sounded. She had known this was coming – for weeks! – and yet it had still, somehow, crept up on her! Taken her by surprise! How … how could it all have ended like this as she had been lying right there? After weeks of vigil, her grandmother had just slipped away in the middle of the night? Anna had told her to expect decline and Cheyne–Stokes breathing and death rattles. There was supposed to have been an ending, a distinct stage where they got to have their goodbye.

She dropped her head into her hands, feeling her despair build – and guilt too. The truth was, she had begun to feel resentful sitting in this room for days upon end, whiling away the hours, waiting for the moment of no return. Hadn't she breathed more deeply every time she set foot outside the villa? Running in the rain to Christie's, flirting with a handsome stranger with a box, skiing Mont Blanc … it had all made her feel alive. She had been greedy for her own life to continue even as she waited for her grandmother's to end.

But now that it had, all she wanted was to go back to it. To get to the moment right before and stop there. Because even on that precipice, it still held possibility within it – for one more conversation. One more smile. Even more tears … She would take that over cold, hard, stony silence.

‘There was still so much to say,’ she whispered. Too late, she realized all the questions she hadn’t asked. The questions only her grandmother had ever had the answers to: what had been Dulcie’s mother’s worst mistake as a teenager? Her best decision? The name of her first boyfriend? What had she told her when she’d met Dulcie’s father? How had she done her hair in a beehive, the way it was styled in that photo with Nureyev? What had happened to her grandfather?

‘God, how could that have been our last conversation, Mémé?’ The question came out as a cry as she thought of all those people – strangers – in the room with them yesterday, pulling her away, her grandmother’s last words almost drowned out in chaos. But she had heard them, seen the shape of them on her lips: what her grandmother believed to be the source of all her troubles.

The ring.

A sound at the door made her start, and she turned to see Helda and Georges peering round the door in their dressing gowns, their ashen faces mirroring her own. Without a word she got up and ran across the room to them, feeling their arms close around her as together they all began to cry.

The undertaker was there within the hour. Helda, always given to showing love through efficiency, had swung into action. Dulcie stood in the reception hall, shivering in front of the roaring fire and undressed Christmas tree, eyes averted as her grandmother’s body was taken out into the private ambulance.

Helda and Georges were standing either side of her, almost in a ceremonial line. Anna was in the kitchen talking with the funeral home director, recording her official statement. Their guest, Wagstaff, was still in his room, oblivious to all the activity going on around him. It was still early – not yet eight – and he had slept through it all, and for that Dulcie was glad. This was the most private of moments, not one to be shared, even with old friends.

She walked slowly out to the courtyard, watching as the black doors were locked shut. The funeral director came out after her with a file pressed against her chest. ‘I have all we need for the moment. I’ll be in touch later today, if you think you’ll feel up to making arrangements?’

Dulcie nodded.

‘My condolences for your loss.’

Dulcie supposed it was what she always said to the bereaved. She wondered how many more times the funeral director would say it to hollowed-out strangers, even just today.

The vehicles pulled away, rolling down the serpentine, tree-lined drive to where the grand electric gates had already been opened. Her grandmother would never return here. She had left, for the last time, the home where she had grown up and spent almost her entire life.

Dulcie felt a wave of sorrow roll through her. This was really it. She was truly alone now. She watched until the convoy had gone out of sight, until the gates had whirred back into action and closed with a soft click. Locking her grandmother out. And her in.

She felt the blade come down, clean and sharp, cleaving her from everything that had gone before. Her life would now be divided into two parts. Before, when she had a family; and After, when she did not.

She stood there for a few more minutes, staring at nothing, not wanting to go back inside, scared that if she turned around, she would find her home was now just a house.

'Dulcie?'

She looked over to see Alejandro standing on the outdoor staircase to the flat. His duffel bag was slung over his shoulder, ready to go, an Uber – which must have been obscured from her sight by the ambulance – already idling outside the garage.

She saw the look on his face, his shock growing as he understood the scene. For several moments, they stared at one another; she wanted to run to him, but her feet wouldn't move, and a moment later he walked over to the car and ducked down out of sight.

She looked away, feeling her despair pitch and tears prick her eyes again. She wasn't sure what she had expected, or hoped. They had agreed he would go; he was doing it for her sake. This was a time for family only, they had agreed. But it didn't feel like a mercy.

She heard the car turn its circle around the frozen fountain, the occupants obscured by the sky reflected on the windscreen as they passed her. She hadn't thought it was possible to feel more alone, and yet somehow—

She turned to go back inside, but a movement caught in the periphery of her vision and she looked across the courtyard. Alejandro was still there, standing on the cobbles, watching her.

She stood as rooted as the oak as he started walking over, feeling the sobs that she had been trying to hold back breaking free. He dropped his bag to the ground as he reached her and, without a word, pulled her in. His embrace felt like a fur coat in a blizzard and suddenly she was out of the wilds, protected again. His shower gel was still pine fresh on his skin. She could feel the faint thudding of his heart beneath her ear, his heartbeat steady and slow, a pacer to her juddered breath.

Dulcie closed her eyes. She didn't want to ever move from here, this sweet spot where both life and death were suspended. She didn't yet have to face the villa without her grandmother, a return to London without him. There was only this. Here and now.

Suddenly it was all that mattered.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lake Geneva
13 June 1963

Lise moved through the yacht club, smiling at all the familiar faces that turned her way as she passed by, pushing the pram. She knew she had to expect scrutiny whenever she appeared in public now. Her reclusiveness, coupled with her tragic back story, had made her an enigma; like Picasso's young wife quietly walking the streets of Paris, she was bathed in the reflected glory of a powerful man. People were fascinated by her dazzling former life in the embassy and intrigued by the morbid curiosity of Valentin's shame, his suicide and leaving her a pregnant widow.

Word had quickly spread that she was back living at Villa Mirelle, but it had spread discreetly, of course. Nothing was ever shouted here. The neighbours respected her privacy behind the high hedges of the family estate; a cheery wave to her on the terrace as they drifted past on the water was as intrusive as it got. So she knew that coming here was a statement. The Bol d'Or was one of the highlights of the Geneva social calendar, and it was very much a place to be seen. Her family had been members for generations and she had grown up here, running along the timbered decks with her friends and neighbours.

She searched through the crowd of bodies lined up along the shore and looking out over the water, where the yachts were beginning to get into position. A gathering wind was blowing, gusty but intermittent. There was a storm forecast, but nothing strong enough to see the event cancelled. Opposition to such a possibility would have been fierce anyway. This was the one event in the year when the locals got to pitch themselves against the rich visitors, sleek Ylliams and twenty-foot JI racing yachts competing

against flotillas of plucky fishing vessels – and quite often, it was the underdogs who won. They took it seriously. All men were equal on the water.

Lise pushed past a group standing on one of the jetties, passing crates of Coca-Cola to a skipper who looked no more than seventeen, mumbling her apologies as she squeezed past another crew passing a rolled-up sail along the deck. The decking rumbled under the wheels of the pram as she went, all the sailors engrossed in their final checks as they prepared to cast off.

She could see Wagstaff up ahead, puffing on a cigar as he sat perched on the prow, watching the activity on the other boats as a younger man leapt on deck to tether some ropes. It was strange to see him in a fisherman's jersey, slacks and navy cap. She had only ever seen him wearing ceremonial white tie, dinner suit or a lounge suit, even when she had lived with him. A residual stiffness seemed to linger in his body, as if their strictures ran bone-deep. She suspected even his pyjamas were double-breasted.

'Delegating, I see,' she quipped, causing him to whip round.

His expression softened at the sight of her. 'Lissy,' he drawled. 'You made it!'

'As if I would miss this. You, skippering, is something I have to see.'

'I'll have you know I trained with the SBS in my day.'

She arched an eyebrow. The British Special Boat Service was the most elite of all the fighting forces. 'Now, when you say *trained* …'

'Well,' he postured, twirling his hand idly. 'They took me on a jolly day out once.'

She laughed. 'So, who's your first mate?' she asked, her attention falling to the younger man. He looked to be around her own age. She had grown accustomed to the sound of double footsteps coming into Wags's apartment at night, the bass timbre of male voices, the midnight slamming of doors … although nothing had ever been explicitly discussed between them. Many things hadn't.

'That's Charlie,' he murmured. 'Cadet at the Academy. Likes sailing, fishing and shooting. His uncle's a brigadier chum from school.'

She looked around for the others, trying not to seem too eager. 'You couldn't convince Sylvie to join your Corpses crew, then?'

'I did try, but she was, uh … corralled onto another boat. I hope it wasn't anything personal. You don't think I'm insufferable company for twenty hours, do you?'

‘Wags, you are the best company,’ Lise smiled. Her eyes searched the deck for a third figure, but to no avail. ‘… Where’s Leo Santos? I thought he was crewing with you too?’

‘Another good bloody question,’ Wagstaff puffed, leaning back and peering down the gangway. A chicken was being loaded onto the neighbouring boat. Lise knew the skipper; he always brought a bird along so as to have fresh eggs during the twenty-four-hour race.

‘He’s not here?’ She couldn’t hide her surprise.

‘No, and they’ve already tooted the first horn.’ He looked back at her. ‘I was rather hoping you might have seen him.’

‘Me? Why would I have seen him?’

Wagstaff shrugged. ‘I just thought, if he had followed up on the lunch suggestion, you might have been in touch. He did seem rather keen.’

That had been precisely the intention but she swallowed, knowing she had to appear detached. ‘We had a vague arrangement to meet for lunch tomorrow after this, but nothing binding.’

‘Hmm. That’s too bad,’ Wagstaff frowned, eyes narrowed as he cast around again for a sighting. ‘Another pair of hands would go a long way out there, but we really need to get going. I’ve been delaying as long as I can, but they’re going to ring the start bell in ten, and we need to get into position. Which, with this wind—’

As if on cue, a strong gust assailed them, almost spinning his cap from his head and making Lise’s hair fly like Medusa’s snakes.

He sighed. ‘—Will be easier said than done.’

She bit her lip anxiously as she scanned the crowds. Leo had said he would be here. He knew the plan backwards. Everyone was supposed to see them here together, to be followed up with their lunch date booked for tomorrow. A tentative reunion, blossoming into something more, would give them the stamp of respectability they needed as she slowly came out of mourning.

If Wagstaff left without him …

‘But … that makes no sense,’ she said, trying to stall for time, looking around more urgently now as the other boats left the dock. ‘If he said he’d be here … I mean, he’s never struck me as … disorganized.’

‘He’s an artist, remember, Lissy. Chaos is a prerequisite for that kind of mind.’

‘But hasn’t he contacted you, to say he’s running late?’ She had spoken to Leo just yesterday. Seen him. ‘He’ll know he’s letting you down.’

‘We haven’t spoken since the other week when we agreed where to meet and what time. Who knows – perhaps his train was delayed? Or maybe, with any luck, he didn’t get on it at all.’

What?

‘… Why would that be a good thing?’ Lise turned back to find him already watching her with a look she had seen only once before: at the Élysée Palace reception, following his contretemps with General Markov. For a moment, just a single one, there had been an unshuttering behind his eyes, revealing a depth of feeling usually concealed behind oblique good manners. In that instance, it had been contempt. In this … concern?

Charlie bounded over, leaping down from the cabin and regarding her coolly. ‘If we’re going to do this, sir …’

‘Yes, yes.’ Wagstaff took a drag on the cigar, then let it drop into the water like a missile heading for the seabed. He watched the ripples spread out, growing ever weaker until the water quickly calmed again, no outward signs of the breach.

He looked back at her, his usual self once more. ‘When you see the old sport, tell him I’m sorry we couldn’t wait any longer. Can’t risk losing our spot.’

‘But can you man this with just the two of you?’ With its glossy duck-egg-blue hull and navy sails, the boat sat halfway on the scale between the luxury yachts and the patched-together shrimpers. She looked at the rigging, the long beam, the double masts … It would be a lot of work for a two-man crew. If they could just wait another few minutes …

‘As I said, trained with the best,’ Wagstaff said, giving her a wink. ‘See you tomorrow, Lissy. We’ll be the ones out in front.’ The race would run anything from eighteen hours for the leaders to twenty-six for the stragglers.

Reluctantly, she stepped back – though she was unsettled and upset – and watched as Charlie unspooled the tethering ropes and they started gliding back from the dock. Wagstaff set to his duties immediately and she could see that, self-deprecation and vainglorious boasts aside, he was in fact a skilled sailor. Of course he was.

The boat moved quickly into open water, rocking as it cut through the light chop to join the rest of the line-up. She watched their figures growing

smaller on the vessel, then indistinct.

She shivered as another gust caught her, pulling her cardigan off her shoulder momentarily. It was growing cold on the water and out here.

Where was he? Where was he?

She turned the pram around and began making her way back to the clubhouse. There were plenty of boats still docked that weren't racing, people just hanging around on deck, talking and drinking, some listening to their radios … But the very last of the racers were now making their way to the line.

A rope landed almost at her feet as she passed by, and she looked up. 'Sylvie, hey!'

Her former assistant, on deck, looked up as the boat slipped its moorings. She too looked strikingly different out of a suit, sporty in slacks and a windcheater. It wasn't a description Lise would ever have thought to apply to a woman she considered the ultimate bureaucrat.

'Good luck!' Lise called.

'… Thank you! I think we're going to need it,' Sylvie called back, waving as the wind buffeted her.

Lise sighed, casting another desperate look around. She had seen everyone but the one person she needed. Something had to have happened. Had he overslept? Was he sick? She continued along the jetty and went towards the clubhouse to wait for him there. He'd know where to come looking once he saw he'd missed the start.

She tried to bite back her frustration. It wasn't ideal; but, she reminded herself, it wasn't a disaster either. There was still time to get things back on track. If being married to Valentin had taught her one thing, it was that adaptability was the foundation of any successful negotiation. She just had to be patient. And keep smiling through it.

Lise stood on the terrace, hair blowing around her head, rain stinging her cheeks as she looked down the length of the lake. It had been nine hours now since the bell had rung and the boats started their long course down towards Le Bouveret, where they would turn and head back. From here, she had an impressive view – or she would have had, but the weather had turned for the worse. A lot worse. Throughout the day, the sky had darkened ominously, with thick clouds the colour of bruises obscuring even the mountains on the other shore – and they kept falling ever lower. The water

was the colour of battleships and the troop of white horses rearing and bucking down the lake's length this morning had become huge waves, so that the entire basin now was like a witch's cauldron come to the boil.

The storm had come in far harder – and faster – than forecast, and Lise was certain the race would be abandoned now, no matter how fiercely the town locals might object. She was worried about everyone out there, but especially her friends. Soon it would be nightfall and these conditions would become even more treacherous. Already flares were going up, tingeing the thick skies red. She had grown up on the shores of this lake but she had rarely seen it in such fierce conditions at this time of year.

Everything felt … wrong. The weather. The regatta.

She had a bad feeling she could neither explain nor shake. She had waited at the yacht club for hours, getting caught up in gossipy conversations she would have preferred to avoid. But Leo hadn't shown.

It wasn't like him. He was cautious, even to the point of paranoia, but he always found a way to communicate with her. Their system had worked flawlessly for the seven months since they'd come to Switzerland. Why this silence on what should have been the first day of their fresh new start?

She turned and went back into the villa, passing by Helda, the new young housemaid, who was trying to batten back one of the shutters which had come away from its stay and was beating wildly in the wind. Lise saw that some of the louvres had already been knocked out of the frame by the force of the storm.

'Let me help you,' she said, struggling to pinion it firmly while the young woman caught the swing bracket and finally locked it into position.

'Thank you, madame,' she gasped, closing the French door behind them as they both hurried inside, smoothing their hair as they escaped the wind at last.

'Has the race been cancelled yet?' Lise asked, looking back out from the safety of the library.

'Officially, I don't believe so, though most boats have retired at Le Bouveret. Your father and Georges are listening on the wireless. Many boats have capsized.'

Lise shook her head. 'It's madness! People could die out there. Just look at the number of flares going up.'

They watched as the sky bled red again. It looked as if the gods were at war.

‘I am very worried,’ Helda murmured. ‘I know many people racing today. My uncle is out there.’

Lise looked at her. ‘Is he a skilled sailor?’

‘Yes. But who can fight against these conditions?’

‘The forecast wasn’t for anything like this,’ Lise fretted. ‘They should have cancelled at the first signs of the wind getting bad. They had to put down all the umbrellas at the club; everything was flying about.’

‘Oh – did Monsieur Santos find you there?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘He arrived just after you left this morning.’

‘He was here?’

Lise swallowed. He never came to Mirelle; it had been their golden rule. Except for the christening, they had been careful to make sure he stayed away. They would take no risks: no one – not their neighbours, the staff, nor her parents – could see him here. Gossip could not be allowed to start up, nor theories be formulated. Their friendship had to look all but brand new.

‘Yes. I told him you were out for the day, but he insisted on waiting for you. He said you had made plans and that you were expecting him.’

Lise frowned. ‘Yes – but we were supposed to meet at the yacht club, not here.’

The housekeeper looked worried. ‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘No, it’s not your f—’ Lise turned away, feeling light-headed. Something was wrong. She had sensed it before, but now she knew; he would never have come to the villa unless it was an emergency. ‘Helda, tell me what happened exactly.’

The young woman looked nervous. She was only a few weeks into her new position. ‘Um … I told him you were out, but he insisted you were meeting here. So I showed him into the drawing room, just in case I had been mistaken and you were coming back. I went to make him some tea. When I came in with it, he said he had made an error and would go to the yacht club instead.’

Lise stared at her. This wasn’t adding up. They had talked through the plan countless times. She knew that Leo knew they were to meet by the boat – that everything had to appear light and unforced, as per their conversation at the christening.

‘You look pale. Shall I run a bath for you, madame?’ Helda asked, seeing her damp clothes. ‘You don’t want to catch a chill.’

Lise thought for a moment, trying to stem the nausea that was beginning to rise at the back of her throat. '… Actually, Helda, could you ask Georges to bring round the Jag, please?'

'Of course, madame.'

She knew her voice sounded strange, that she was behaving oddly. She could feel the young woman's concern across the room. 'The baby's still sleeping?'

'*Oui*. The nanny is in with her.'

Lise nodded. 'Then I shan't be long. I just need some air.'

She went through to the cloakroom on legs that felt like they could scarcely support her and reached for her mackintosh and gumboots. When she went outside a few minutes later, Georges had the car parked as close as possible to the front door, the engine purring on idle.

'Thank you, Georges,' she said, sliding into the driver's seat.

She pulled away, the electric gates already swinging open as she drove down along the meandering driveway, past the mature beech trees she had played under as a child.

Her fingers gripped the wheel tightly, her gaze focusing on the shafts of white light thrown ahead into the growing darkness. The roads were quiet thanks to the storm – no one wanted to leave home unnecessarily on a night like this – and it was less than a ten-minute drive to her usual parking spot. She was always careful never to stop right at the top of the path lest she draw attention to the all but forgotten access route down to the water, even though there were only a few gated estates down this way and the old chapel had been out of use for decades. There was no reason for anyone to walk down here and chance upon it unless she broadcast it.

She cut the ignition, taking a moment to adjust to the darkness before getting out. Immediately the wind grabbed at her again, making her hair fly, the rain like steel pellets. She dipped her chin and began running down the grassy path. She knew it so well, she could remember every divot and loose stone, but it had been raining for hours and water was running down in streams, cutting in new grooves.

The stocky silhouette of the chapel soon came into sight, shadowy in the deepening dusk; beyond it, the drystone wall and the old stables. Even from here, she could see there was no light on.

Panting hard, shivering from the cold, she stopped at the rusty gate and looked in. Waiting.

Nothing stirred. Even the patrol guards were in for the night, tucked up in their goose house – but she knew even the slightest squeak of the gate hinge would bring them out, gobbling furiously, flapping their wings and stretching their necks.

Still, her hand hovered, ready to move in.

She looked down to her right, on reflex. It was the agreed protocol – but she flinched as she saw what she had not expected to see. What had never been there before.

There, wedged among the stones, was the old pair of reading glasses: the tortoiseshell frames faded, the lenses without glass, the arm cracked. To anyone seeing them, they were nothing. Just old junk. But to her, they were a signal.

Do not approach.

Go back.

Run.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lake Geneva
5 December 2026

The dining-room door opened with a creak.

Dulcie looked up from her plate of untouched toast and honey. Her tea, half drunk, was cold. Alejandro sat perpendicular to her at the end of the table, a mug of coffee in his hands.

'… My dear girl.' Tatton was pale-faced as he came in and more stooped than she recalled, as if bowed down with grief. 'I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am.'

'Thank you, Wags,' she murmured, looking down. This was one of the things she'd hated most about bereavement when her parents died: all the condolences. Having the weight of other people's sorrow placed upon her, as if she was somewhere to stow their grief. '… Would you like some breakfast?'

He looked at the two of them, sitting quietly; Alejandro's hand moved closer to hers, hovering near her protectively. Wagstaff was seasoned at reading a room. 'I … I have called for a car. I won't intrude on you any longer; I will wait in the library and leave you in peace.'

'That's not necessary, really,' she said. 'Join us. Helda is coming through with some fresh tea.'

It felt strange to sit in here in the morning surrounded by crystal lustres, antique Meissen plates on the walls, velvet chairs. The table sat sixteen. It would have been more natural to sit in the kitchen as usual, but some of the work that always followed a death was happening in there – Helda bringing down the bedsheets from her grandmother's room, washing the glass that had been beside her bed – and Dulcie wasn't ready yet to take part in that.

Alejandro seemed to understand that she didn't want to talk, but his eyes kept falling upon her, cloaking her in silent concern.

Wagstaff took a seat at the other side of the table, opposite Dulcie, almost as if they were having a meeting rather than breakfast. He seemed embarrassed as he pulled his chair in and unfolded his napkin.

'I do wish someone had woken me,' he mumbled.

'Why?' she asked flatly. 'By the time we all realized, there was nothing to be done about it.'

'… It just feels wrong to have slept through such a thing.'

'You must have been very tired.'

'Yes. Not to mention, my hearing is so poor now; when I sleep, I hear nothing. I've been putting off getting a hearing aid, but perhaps this is the sign …' He sighed, seeming defeated.

'Hmph,' Alejandro muttered, sipping his coffee.

Dulcie glanced at him in confusion, picking up on a buzz of hostility she hadn't felt from him before.

Helda came in with the fresh tea, setting down the pot and looking at Wagstaff. 'Your usual, Monsieur Wagstaff?'

'Actually, I'll just have tea this morning, but would you be so kind as to let me know when my car arrives?'

'Of course.' The housekeeper's gaze brushed over Dulcie – pale, silent, immobile – as she went out again.

'You're sure that you want to leave?' Dulcie asked Wagstaff.

He nodded. 'You need your privacy.'

'Well, there was no need for you to call a car,' she murmured, her fingers plucking at the edge of the napkin in her lap. 'Georges could easily have run you to the station, or the airport.'

'You all have quite enough to deal with.'

He was right, yet everything felt eerily calm right now. 'Are you going back to London?'

'Well, that rather depends.'

'On?'

'Will the funeral be a private affair?' She knew what he was really asking: was he invited?

'No.' She couldn't bear the thought of herself, Georges and Helda sitting in an otherwise empty church. 'I know there are a great many people who'd

like to pay their respects. Granny was deeply loved.' She looked at him. 'You must come.'

'Thank you. It would mean a great deal to me.'

Alejandro leaned into her, meeting her gaze. 'Uh, before you commit to anything, I think we should speak. In private.' His voice was so low that Wagstaff seemed not to hear as he poured some tea.

Dulcie looked at him. 'What – now?'

'There are some things I think you should know.' He flicked his eyes in Wagstaff's direction, scarcely moving his lips. 'About him … You may not want him there once you hear the truth.'

Dulcie looked at him in bewilderment, seeing the intensity of his expression. '… What truth?'

'… Hmm?'

She glanced up to see Wagstaff looking questioningly at them, poised with a sugar cube held in delicate silver tongs. 'Did you say something?'

Dulcie looked at his wizened face: rheumy blue eyes, gaunt cheeks, purest white hair. In so many ways, he seemed like the grandfather she had never had – he was distinguished, funny, interesting. And yet there was a frisson of something else too, just below the surface – a grain of steel beneath the silver polish. That sense of being pushed. Manipulated. His extraordinary charm must have surely greased the wheels of his life. Had he ever been told *no*?

She hadn't said no to him. She had allowed him to stay here during exceptional circumstances – but what was there to show for it? He hadn't told her grandmother his burning secret. She had gone to her grave none the wiser for his pilgrimage here.

'Is everything all right, Dulcie?' he asked.

She took a breath, aware of Alejandro sitting rigidly beside her. She could feel his heat, a bristling protectiveness in his manner she hadn't seen before. What did he know that she didn't?

'I've done everything you've asked of me, haven't I, Wags?'

'Indeed you have. And I'm tremendously grateful.'

'Then perhaps you could do something for me in return?'

'Name it.'

'Tell me why you came here? You said last night that we could talk this morning. What was it you wanted to say to Granny when you asked us to leave the room?'

He shook his head despondently. ‘She’s gone now. None of it matters.’

‘It matters to me. I have no one left. At the very least, I should know the truth about my own family.’

‘Of course you should, but we must balance that with still honouring your grandmother’s secrets.’

‘I never knew she had any! Not until you arrived on our doorstep …’

He seemed to weigh her words, a silence blooming. ‘Perhaps it was a mistake, my coming here.’

‘No, it’s too late for that now!’ Dulcie exclaimed. She wasn’t going to let him wriggle off the hook with belated regrets. ‘You did come here. You don’t get to express your misgivings after the fact … An explanation is the very least you owe me before you leave.’

Wagstaff looked back at her, then at Alejandro, seeing no ally in the other man’s eyes. He looked conflicted. ‘… It would be upsetting for you.’

‘You think I’m not already upset?’ she asked, sarcasm a frill on her words. She leaned in, refusing to let it go. ‘Tell me what you came here to tell her. You said it was about what happened after my grandfather’s death …?’

He fell quiet again, looking ponderous, his hands resting on the table at his sides like a nervous schoolboy.

‘Actually, I said it was about what happened after Valentin’s death,’ he said finally.

‘Same thing,’ she shrugged.

‘No.’ He looked straight at her. ‘Because Valentin Erlach wasn’t your grandfather.’

Dulcie felt her heart miss a beat. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Your grandfather was Leo Santos … They fell in love and had an affair. Lissy discovered she was pregnant just a few weeks after Valentin’s death.’ He frowned. ‘The dates of the pregnancy meant the baby would have to be passed off as his. It was a different time back then, you understand, and your grandmother didn’t want to strip him of his dignity in death.’

‘How could *you* know, then?’

‘You mean, besides the fact the baby was the spit of Leo?’

Dulcie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her grandmother had kept this secret for over sixty years?

‘Who else knew?’

‘As far as I know, no one.’

‘Did my mother know who her father was?’

Wagstaff gave a hopeless shrug. ‘I don’t know.’

Dulcie felt as if the room was spinning. How could she only be hearing about this now? Mere hours after her grandmother’s death, when she could no longer ask her anything?

My darling Leo … My love … My spy.

She looked back at Wagstaff, knowing that she had to ask the right questions of him. Right now, before he left this house. He was the only one left.

‘You knew him too? Santos?’

‘Yes. Not well, but we crossed paths at a lot of official functions. It’s a small world anyway, the diplomatic service—’

‘Did you know he was a spy?’

Wagstaff laughed at her question, and she knew it was a stupid one. ‘He wasn’t really—’

‘Were *you* a spy?’ Alejandro asked abruptly, interjecting himself into the conversation.

‘Me …?’ Tatton shook his head. ‘Sadly not. I was merely a humble bureaucrat in fancy dress.’

But Alejandro shook his head slowly. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t?’ Wagstaff seemed more bemused than troubled by this refutation.

Alejandro leaned in on his elbows. ‘I did some internet trawling last night, after the things that were said in the bedroom.’

Dulcie looked over at him. That was what he had been doing in the middle of the night?

He caught her glance. ‘You were upset,’ he shrugged, his voice softer. ‘I wanted to help.’ He looked back at Wagstaff. ‘So I searched for the names that had come up: Leo Santos. General Sergei Markov … You.’

Wagstaff blinked. ‘Did you find anything of interest?’

‘Plenty. But not about you. Nothing at all comes up under your name. Which, in itself, is suspicious.’

‘Not when you’re my age,’ Wagstaff smiled. ‘No one of my vintage was born with a … what’s it called? A digital handprint. And I’m afraid I’ve never done anything to merit attention from the press.’

Alejandro was undeterred. ‘What about classified documents?’

‘They’d all have been unsealed by now. Over fifty years have passed. If there was anything to see on me, you’d be able to see it.’

‘Unless you did something that’s been sealed for longer.’

‘It would have to have been particularly sensational to be sealed for seventy-five or a hundred years.’

Alejandro shrugged, not dismissing the possibility.

‘… Well, I’m flattered you’d think me capable of such feats,’ Wagstaff said after a moment’s pause, nodding slightly.

Dulcie looked at him: the consummate Englishman in his countryside tattersall shirt, mustard-coloured cashmere vest and tweed jacket. James Bond he wasn’t.

But Alejandro just smiled, as if he’d anticipated this. ‘Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance – isn’t that how the saying goes?’

There was a small silence, Wagstaff’s eyebrows hitching upwards in a small tell of genuine surprise. ‘*The Art of War*. You know it?’

‘I have three brothers. We were always playing at being spies, commandos, ninjas … That book was our bible growing up.’

‘As it was in the diplomatic service.’

‘I know … I told you. I’ve been doing my research.’

Wagstaff looked interested now. ‘I’m impressed. Tell me, what else did you learn?’

‘That Dulcie’s grandmother was telling the truth: Santos was a spy for the Russians. He disappeared without trace in the summer of sixty-three.’ Alejandro didn’t so much as blink as he stared the older man down. ‘I think you know a lot more than you’re telling us.’

Dulcie watched them. ‘Wags?’

He looked over at her, seeing the beseeching expression in her eyes … He nodded. ‘Very well. I can certainly tell you what I know. As Alejandro says, it is all declassified now anyway, so they won’t shoot me. I’m not worth the bullets to them at this point.’

She couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not.

‘Leo Santos was an artist with a political conscience. In his student days – and unbeknownst to his employers at the Spanish embassy – he had been loosely connected to the anti-Franco resistance in Spain. That was in the mid-fifties, early sixties, but the divisions from the Civil War of the thirties still ran deep, and there was a strong socialist and communist underground movement over there. I think that when Santos became a cultural attaché in

the diplomatic service, he thought he could sabotage from the inside … Well, *sabotage* is probably too strong a word. He wasn't terribly good at it.'

'What good would he have been in Paris, anyway?' Alejandro asked, eyes narrowed intently. They were talking about his homeland, after all. 'How could he help Spain from there?'

'It was the capital of Europe at that point,' Wagstaff shrugged. 'Germany was divided – the Berlin Wall had just gone up; Italy was still impoverished after the Second World War; and Spain was repressed and deeply split below the surface. Paris was up there with London and Washington in terms of international muscle.

'Santos was sent to Paris on a mission to win over Pablo Picasso, who was living there at the time. He was the most famous living artist in the world, and a staunch commie. But even so, he had his own disillusionments with the party. Leo was wooing him with the idea of a retrospective at the Prado, and he was open to persuasion. It would have been a major coup for the Falangists – Picasso's status as a hero of the left would have been obliterated. Propaganda heaven for Franco.'

'I don't recall ever hearing about that retrospective,' Alejandro frowned.

'Because it never came to pass. Knowing what we know now, more likely he and Santos were talking together about ways to take down Franco. They were politically aligned – albeit secretly – and there was a lot of feeling about that summer that the general was about to be toppled. Didn't happen, of course, but we didn't know that then.'

'So you're saying Santos spied for the Soviets because he was a secret communist trying to take down his own government?' Dulcie asked.

'No. When push came to shove, his political convictions didn't run that deep. He had moved on since his student days and was more of a socialist sympathizer than a revolutionary. But the Soviets could still use his past against him – and I believe they did.'

'They blackmailed him?'

'Yes. The secret services always use whatever they can as leverage – homosexuality. Infidelity. They knew about his affair with Lise, and they held it over him. They wanted access to her husband's office.'

'Why?'

'They wanted a confidential memo that, if leaked, would make JFK look bad on the world stage. An American lawyer called Donovan was negotiating at the time on behalf of the US government for the release of

over a thousand US hostages; this was following the Bay of Pigs invasion in sixty-one, the year before. You've heard of it?'

They nodded.

'Well, the American embassy had closed down in Havana at this point, and the Cuban embassy had closed in Washington – so they were each using the Swiss embassies in those cities as proxies. Valentin was involved in a support role.

'Donovan was proposing to Castro to swap prisoners for food and medical supplies – a good compromise, given the economic sanctions in effect at the time. But then this memo was leaked in which JFK talked about suspending the talks until after some elections that were coming up. He didn't want it becoming a voting issue, you see.'

He looked at them both with a sombre expression. 'You have to view it in the political context of the day. This was a matter of weeks, if not days, before the Cuban Missile Crisis came to light; it was the cold war, and tensions were running high. Clearly, the Soviets were trying to destabilize negotiations between Cuba and America and to weaken JFK's moral and political standing. Which they succeeded in doing, for a while.'

Wagstaff looked pained as he took a breath. 'Unfortunately, the further fallout from the leak – the ripple effect, if you like – was that it also proved sensitive documents had been passed from the Swiss embassies to the Soviets. Valentin was the common link. He was in the meetings. Everything crossed his desk. Ergo, he was the mole.'

Alejandro frowned. 'That's why he took his own life.'

Wagstaff spread his hands, acknowledging the point.

Dulcie clasped her hand over her mouth. So the man she had grown up believing to be her grandfather had been killed, in effect, by the actions of her actual grandfather?

'And Granny knew about this,' she whispered.

'No, I don't beli—'

'But she said she did,' Dulcie insisted. 'She called him *my love, my spy*.'

Wagstaff was quiet for a moment. '… Yes. You may be right.'

Dulcie watched, feeling discomfited to have caught him in an outright lie. Why was he still trying to protect her grandmother? To keep her out of blame's way …?

She looked at Wagstaff, a sudden chill in her blood. 'Is there any chance that Santos faked the entire thing?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘The love affair … What if he wasn’t being blackmailed? Could he have been working for the Soviets all along, and he started the relationship with Granny to gain access to Valentin’s office?’ Had her grandmother been tricked – played from the start? Was that why Wagstaff was trying to protect her?

‘Oh. No.’ Wagstaff shook his head with certainty.

‘But how can you be so sure?’

‘Because I was there the night they met. Sparks flew between them immediately. A blind man could have seen the attraction.’

‘… Really?’

He thought for a moment. ‘As I recall, it was a celebration for the Algerian declaration of independence, so it would have been … midsummer of sixty-two. I remember because it was the same night I met your grandmother, too. Her Paris debut.’

‘And you’re saying it was love at first sight between them?’

‘Lust, certainly. I’m not sure that’s when their affair started, though. Your grandmother was still very much in thrall to Valentin. They were newlyweds, and the scales were yet to fall from her eyes … He wasn’t all he purported to be either, I’m afraid.’

‘It doesn’t sound like anyone was,’ Alejandro muttered, drumming his fingers on the table.

‘It was Paris in the early sixties. We were all a little drunk on life. We were all beautiful young creatures back then. There was opportunity, and mostly we took it.’

‘So, was it just an affair, then?’ Dulcie pushed, trying to understand. Had a man died because of something fleeting, or something true? ‘Nothing serious? It would have fizzled out if she hadn’t fallen pregnant?’

‘Who can say?’ Wags shrugged. ‘I certainly felt it had legs to go the distance … I do recall running into your grandmother at the Rodin museum one day. She was unusually flustered to see me and desperate to shepherd me away. I couldn’t fathom why until I caught sight of Leo coming in moments later, looking every inch the lovelorn suitor. We passed almost right by him, but they completely blanked each other. There was no way she couldn’t have seen him – nor he us – and I realized then that I had interrupted a lovers’ rendezvous. So the affair had definitely started by then.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘Nothing. I never mentioned it.’

‘Granny never knew that you knew?’

‘No. And it always saddened me that she didn’t feel she could share it with me. But keeping secrets was second nature back then. It was just the world we moved in, I suppose.’

‘I thought you said you were just a dusty diplomat,’ Alejandro countered.

‘Indeed; but at the end of the day, diplomacy and espionage are just different faces of the same coin. They’re the sister skills of manipulation.’ He smiled, looking back at the younger man. ‘Here’s a quote for you, if you know the book so well: “The supreme art of war—”’

‘—is to subdue the enemy without fighting,’ Alejandro finished for him.

‘Precisely. Perhaps they’ll make a spy of you, Alejandro,’ Wagstaff smiled. ‘You’re far cleverer than I.’

Dulcie watched them spar, a battle of wits, male pride. Ego. But she didn’t care about any of that. Her entire world had just changed. This was about her family. The people she had loved and lost – those she had never known, and those she had never even known about.

The door opened with another creak, and Helda came in again.

‘Mr Wagstaff’s car is here.’

‘Ah, thank you, Madame Marchand,’ Wagstaff said, carefully pushing back his chair and gripping the table as he shakily rose to standing.

Dulcie walked around to him. She didn’t want him to go – there was still so much more she wanted to ask. ‘Wags. It’s hard to know what to say.’

‘There’s nothing for you to say, dear girl. I know it can have been no pleasure at all hosting me under these very difficult circumstances, but you have been most gracious and kind. You are your grandmother’s granddaughter, as they say.’

Just not her grandfather’s granddaughter.

‘How can I get hold of you, to give you the funeral details?’ Or if she had more questions …

‘I will give my phone number to Helda on the way out. No need to trouble you with admin on a day like this.’

She held out her hand, though it felt strangely insufficient after all they had been through. Rather than shaking it, he pressed it to his lips.

‘*Adieu*.’

‘*Adieu*, Wags.’

He shook hands with Alejandro. ‘Look after her, won’t you, young man? She’s a precious creature.’

Alejandro nodded, his eyes still distrustful. Seemingly they could agree on this one thing.

Wagstaff turned to go. ‘No need to see me out,’ he murmured, holding up a hand to stop her politely escorting him as he began walking towards the door. ‘I’ve been in the way long enough. Enjoy your breakfast in peace.’

Dulcie caught Helda’s eye as the housekeeper pulled the door closed behind her and led their guest away.

She walked back to her place and sank into the chair, elbows splayed on the table as she cradled her head. She felt depleted, as if she’d gone ten rounds in the ring.

‘Are you okay?’ Alejandro asked her.

‘Sure,’ she shrugged, running a hand through her hair and propping up her head with one hand. ‘I mean … as much as you can be after hearing something like that.’

‘It’s been a rough morning.’

Would it have been better not to know any of it? she wondered, watching as he reached for the teapot and refreshed her cup. He dropped in a couple of sugar cubes.

‘I don’t take sugar in my tea,’ she murmured.

‘Today you do.’

Her eyes flicked towards him. ‘… I can’t believe you did all that research. You must hardly have slept.’ She wanted to tell him she had seen the lights burning in the dead of night.

‘I was worried about you. And I didn’t trust him …’ He shrugged. ‘I still don’t.’

‘No?’

The door opened and Helda peered in again. ‘He’s gone.’

‘Right … Okay, thanks.’ Dulcie gave a deep sigh. Part of her wouldn’t have been surprised if something else had sprung up on his way to the door. He was a frail old man, and yet it seemed as if sharp shadows trailed him.

Had it been a mistake, all this – indulging him with this insane quest? Coming all the way here to tell her grandmother …

Wait … Tell her what?

Dulcie realized suddenly that he still hadn’t answered her question. She had asked him outright what it was that he had come here to say – and he

had told her everything but. He had told her about her grandmother's affair with a spy and how that had led to the death of her husband. But he still hadn't said what had happened afterwards.

He'd talked around the topic, but away from the point.

She remembered something he'd said in the library the other morning: *The art of diplomacy is letting others have your way.*

She frowned as she sat back in the chair.

Why did it feel like he'd just got his?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lake Geneva
5 December 2026

‘… Yes, this morning …’ She ran a hand through her hair as she paced the dining-room rug.

‘Dulcie, I’m sorry,’ Quinn said down the line. He had called for an update on the skiing trip, not expecting the news she gave him instead.

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘How are you feeling? I mean, really feeling?’

She gave a small scoff. ‘Honestly? Shocked. Which I know sounds ridiculous.’

‘It’s not.’

‘I’ve spent the past few weeks here, just waiting, and then … she was just suddenly gone. No warning. No big build-up. If anything, she’d seemed a bit better the past few days. She’d remembered who I was. We talked a bit.’ She had met Alejandro too. Somehow that felt important. ‘I knew it wouldn’t last, but … I just didn’t expect it to be like that.’

‘But she didn’t suffer, so that’s … That’s the best you could hope for her,’ Quinn said, trying to find positives.

‘Yeah.’ Dulcie heaved a deep sigh, running a hand over her face and keeping it there for a moment. She felt bone-tired. Sad. Frustrated.

‘So what now?’

‘Well, in terms of the funeral, there’s not much for me to do. She had it all planned out years ago. If there was one thing my grandmother could do, it was plan an event, so I don’t have any executive decisions to make; I just have to set things in motion. I’m speaking to the funeral director this afternoon, and we’ll get a date. I’ll have to sort things out here too, with the

house, but I imagine it'll be no more than a couple of weeks now; and then I guess I'll be back to London after that.'

Alejandro's head lifted, watching her as she walked in figures of eight.

'Well, there's no rush. We'll be into the Christmas break by then, so let's just regroup in the new year. Take your time.'

'Okay, sure … Thanks.'

There was a slight pause at his end, and she knew what was coming. '… So, listen … I hate to ask at a time like this, but … Any update on Hugh Cecil? I got a scary invoice from the building contractors yesterday. We could really do with that project reservation deposit.'

She closed her eyes. She had guessed as much. '… Sure, I understand. Um, well, we went skiing yesterday, obviously—'

'Yes.' She could hear the anxiety in his voice.

'And now he's back in Hong Kong for a few weeks.'

'How did you leave it with him?'

'We've been texting.' She glanced over at Alejandro, to find him already watching her. She could see from the way his head shifted back slightly that he knew who they were talking about. 'He's sending over floor plans and some more images so that we can put together a proposal.'

'Brilliant!'

'But nothing's guaranteed yet,' she said quickly.

'But it's looking hopeful?'

'I mean, yes, I guess.'

'You're encouraged?'

'… Sure.'

'Okay, okay,' he breathed, and she knew he was pacing too. She could just imagine him in the studio, his fidget spinner in his hand as he tried to keep calm. 'Send the floor plans over the very second you get them, okay?'

'Will do,' she nodded.

'Can you follow up with him today?'

'… Uh …'

'Oh God, Dulcie, I'm sorry!' he said as he caught himself. 'I can't believe I just said that. I wasn't thinking!'

'Quinn, it's fine.'

'Not today. Don't even think about it today. It can wait. Focus on … just focus on what you need to. It can all wait.'

‘It can’t wait, though. Look, it’s fine. I’ll try and get the floor plans from him today.’

‘… Yeah?’

‘Sure. Listen, try not to worry so much.’

She heard him sigh. ‘I should be the one consoling you. Not the other way round!’

‘Relax. We’ll speak later, okay?’

‘Sure.’

They hung up, and she turned back into the room. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘No problem,’ Alejandro said, watching as she came back to the table. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah.’ She saw his eyebrow hitch up sceptically. ‘… Quinn, my business partner, just gets easily freaked out. Contractors are fast to invoice; clients are slow to pay … It’s a juggling act.’

‘I get it. I have the same thing.’

She was surprised. ‘You do?’

‘Of course. I made a series of sculptures for this Russian guy’s garden – in Oxfordshire, actually. They were huge. I could have bought a Lamborghini with the cost of the materials alone. The project took over a year in all, working full time on it; I delivered on the scheduled date – and he didn’t pay me for another eight months.’

‘That’s outrageous!’

He shrugged. ‘To be fair, his assets were frozen by the government, so I was probably lucky to get paid at all. But that’s why I decided to take on the residency here. It was a way to cover my baseline so that I don’t have to go back to my father with a begging bowl.’

It wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned his difficult relationship with this father. ‘Is that how he’d really see it?’

‘He’d love nothing more than for me to come back on my knees, conceding that sculpting isn’t a proper job. At least here the rent’s covered, and the sponsored shows help with building my client base while I get a collection together. Then I can get some galleries to represent me, and I should gain some traction … So perhaps that Russian did me a favour.’

Dulcie sank back into her chair, staring into the middle distance. ‘Hmm.’

‘… What is it?’

She looked back at him distractedly. ‘Oh, you just got me thinking …’

‘About?’

‘Your residency here.’ Her eyes narrowed as she looked back at him. ‘How did Granny know about you living at l’Hermitage? Remember I told you the other day?’

He nodded.

‘All I had said was that you were Spanish and a sculptor – and she said you were at l’Hermitage. Like, she just knew it; it wasn’t even a question. But how could she possibly have known that?’

‘Uh …’ He thought too. ‘Well, being a Spanish artist – in whatever discipline – is one of the eligibility criteria. And I guess the studio’s not far from here, so maybe she knew about that, or knew someone who lived th …’ His voice trailed off as the realization hit them both. ‘… Leo Santos was a Spanish artist.’

‘Yes.’

They were silent for several moments, neither one of them knowing exactly what it meant. But Dulcie sensed that it didn’t mean nothing. Santos had supposedly disappeared in 1963, the year her mother – his daughter – had been born. Had he moved here to Switzerland, with her grandmother? It explained the photographs at a stroke.

She shifted position on the chair.

‘So he left Paris and came here and hid out in l’Hermitage. He’d have been close to Granny and the baby. That makes sense, right?’

He nodded.

‘Alé, could we go over there?’

‘Sure.’

‘I mean, right now?’

He was already getting to his feet. ‘I have to feed the geese anyway … Let’s go.’

Dulcie drove them over in the old E-type; Georges had taken the Mercedes into town on an errand for Helda, and she didn’t want to wait. In under ten minutes she was parking up at the top of the narrow, almost overgrown path. They walked down together in pensive silence, only the sound of snow crunching underfoot. The wind was gusty, making her hair fly wildly once they emerged past the hedged estates and the land opened up into pasture. The chapel sat, unbothered, on its plot with quiet fortitude, all but forgotten; the old stable building half hidden from here behind the drystone wall.

They were so close to all the elegant villas picked out with Christmas lights and yet it felt remote down here, tucked away in a little pinch-pleat of the shoreline with no one around. Alejandro pushed on the gate and the geese, already pecking around the yard, rushed towards him in a gaggle. They recognized him on sight, fussing and crying as if he'd been gone for weeks instead of overnight.

'Hey-hey,' he greeted them. He looked back at her. 'You're quite safe.'

'You forget they love me,' she quipped, stepping in behind him.

She followed him down to the building, the geese waddling after her. It was freezing, a breeze blowing in off the lake and the snow having settled into a duvet's thickness on the ground and surfaces; but when they stepped inside – into the space infused with blue light – she was surprised at how much warmer it felt in here now. The snow had settled on the canvas too and its weight had stopped the tarpaulin flapping about in the wind, keeping in the heat.

Was this the place where her grandfather had hidden? She tried to imagine it sixty-odd years ago – what really would have changed between now and then? A few paint jobs? A new kitchen? Clearly the roof hadn't been touched in that time … It was still so primitive, little more than a converted agricultural building.

'I'll get some coffee on,' Alé said, heading straight for the kettle. Wrapping their hands around hot mugs would have to suffice as central heating for now.

She looked around the studio, studying his works in progress. Many of them were bigger than life-size – bigger than her, certainly. He was talented, that much was obvious, although she had been too distracted by him to notice much else the last time she had come here. She stopped to look at some photographs of his other works pinned to a corkboard, propped against the wall on one of the worktops.

'You're really good,' she murmured.

'Thanks for sounding so surprised.'

She turned back to find him smirking at her as he reached for a box file on one of the shelves.

'What's in there?' she asked as he set it down on the table and began rifling through it.

'Paperwork – for the grant. My contract.' He glanced up at her. '… I think there was some material about the history of this place, although I

never bothered to read up on it. But there might be something in it that's relevant …?'

'Good idea.' She looked around the space, through the large windows at the back – which had once been stable doors – that looked down to the lake. His bed was still pushed a full foot in from the walls, a light drift of snow piled on the floor around the edges. His clothes were hanging on a metal rail, a bottle of cologne on the seat of a rush chair … She strained to read the label; she remembered his scent as he had hugged her last night in the hall, and again this morning on the driveway. They had been compassionate gestures in her moment of need, but he had kept his distance from her in every other way. They had moved past their argument at the ski bar yesterday, but they hadn't reverted to type: no more flirtatious smiles or simmering looks. He had been nothing but respectful in the face of her grief. Had they become that impossible thing – friends?

She made herself look away, trying to focus on the reason they'd come here, but now that she was standing in the space again she had no idea what to look for. The conviction she had felt, standing in her own dining room, that she would somehow be able to determine her long-lost grandfather's fate was beginning to fade. What was she even hoping to find? The best she could hope for was an earring that had belonged to her grandmother, or a love letter from him – proof of their togetherness here. But even if either one of them had ever been here, it had been over sixty years ago. How many people had lived here since then?

The kettle came to the boil; Alé was still looking through paperwork, so she went over to the kitchenette and made the coffees. Black, no sugar. It wasn't how she took her coffee, but it was how she took it with him.

'Anything?' she asked, setting his mug down on the table.

He was reading a pamphlet, but he handed it over to her with a shake of his head. 'Nothing about Leo Santos.'

'Damn. Long shot, though, I suppose.'

'Yeah.'

She scanned the text: *promoting Spanish art … culture beyond borders … legacy …* yada, yada … Wait.

'What?' he asked, as she did a double take.

She blinked, thinking for a moment, checking she wasn't getting this wrong, but it wasn't the sort of thing to be easily confused.

'Dulcie. What?' Alé leaned towards her impatiently.

‘The name of the foundation that gives the grant …’

‘The Merian Foundation? What about it?’

‘That’s Granny’s maiden name.’

She sat back. How could she have been so dumb? ‘Oh my God – I can’t believe I missed that.’ She looked back at him with wide eyes. ‘Granny’s father was an art collector and philanthropist. He was heavily involved with the effort to repatriate artworks stolen by the Nazis during the war, particularly those that ended up on the market in Switzerland. He set up a foundation dedicated to restitution and charitable endeavours in the art community.’

There was a pause as Alejandro absorbed this information. ‘You mean, your family owns this?’ He gestured to the building around them.

Did they?

Did she?

‘… I don’t know. I think it’s all in the hands of trustees who run it? But …’ She thought hard, trying to connect the dots. If her grandmother had come back here to have the baby – Dulcie’s mother – and Leo had been in hiding from the Russians, this would have been an ideal hiding spot, wouldn’t it? He would have been close enough to see her and the baby – his baby – and no one would have known. ‘It wouldn’t have raised any eyebrows, my great-grandfather setting up the grant and buying this as an artist’s residence. It would have been just another charitable string to his bow—’

Her phone buzzed and she pulled it out of her coat pocket, looking at it distractedly. She put it down again on the table with a sigh.

‘Your business partner?’ he asked, just as he caught sight of Hugh’s name on the screen.

‘No … Hugh’s just sent over the floor plans and photos.’

To her surprise, he didn’t recoil. ‘Right … Well, that’s good, isn’t it? Didn’t you say you needed them?’ he said as he got up and went back to the kitchenette. He began rinsing some dirty dishes in the sink, his head bowed.

She had said that. She’d appeased Quinn by telling him Hugh was sending them over, but she knew – as well as Alejandro had – that they were his leverage; she was going to have to walk a delicate line to get them without giving Hugh what he wanted. Alejandro had said his friend wouldn’t give them up without getting what he wanted in return – and yet here they were suddenly. No pressure, no games.

Dulcie watched Alejandro's back. He had been in the room when she had been talking to Quinn earlier. He had watched her soothe her partner's concern; he'd heard how important this job was to their fledgling company. He had Hugh's number himself. He knew she'd had the worst day and night.

He had done this for her, just like he had researched Wagstaff's half-truths through the night … He was helping her, even though he believed there was nothing in it for him. He held himself back even though she knew he wanted her. She felt it in every look they shared. Every time they didn't touch.

She watched him for several moments before she got up and walked over to where he was standing. He glanced across, but before he could say anything, she clasped his head in her hands and kissed him. She felt him go completely still for a second, shock overriding his impulses; but then she heard the plate clatter into the sink, the tap still running as he turned and pulled her into him.

The kiss deepened, both of them losing themselves as the barrier was finally breached. She pressed herself against him, needing more, and he lifted her onto the counter, groaning as her legs wrapped around him tightly.

They both knew it was unstoppable.

It had been inevitable from the very start.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lake Geneva
5 December 2026

A snowflake landed on her cheek as she lay in the bed, looking up at the too-blue roof. The wind was getting up again and blowing in stray puffs of snow around the edges of the room. But she wasn't cold. Her entire body felt suffused with a throbbing warmth as she lay under the duvet with him, their limbs intertwined. Their passion hadn't been quickly spent and they hadn't moved from here in several hours, making love and falling asleep, then making love again. He knew his way around a woman's body, making her forget her sadness, making her believe she wasn't really alone in the world, making her cry out.

The day didn't feel connected to the night that had just passed. It didn't feel connected to her own life – it was as if she had stepped off her woodland path for a few hours to nestle in this cosy nook before she had to go on her way again. But what future was there for them beyond this? He lived here, and she would soon be back in London again. And he hadn't exactly hidden from her what kind of man he was. He didn't want commitment if he was seducing married women. No, he liked the thrill of the chase, and she had given him that. They had played themselves out.

'What are you thinking?' he murmured, his head on her chest.

'How do you know I'm thinking anything?'

'I can hear the gears grinding,' he smiled, kissing her breast before looking up at her and locking her in his sights. She felt that flutter in her stomach again, the one she got whenever their eyes met. He would be so easy to fall for.

She looked away as her phone buzzed on the chair that served as his bedside table and she reached over to look at the screen.

Another text from Hugh.

She felt Alejandro's muscles stiffen, though he said nothing, and she let the phone drop back down again. They both knew she would need to call back, if not now, then later. Even as they lay here, skin to skin, Hugh was still a blade between them, glinting sharply.

'I guess I should make a move,' she said after a moment.

'No …' His grip tightened playfully on her.

'I have to.' She willed herself to throw off the duvet, to release the seal on this bubble and let the cold air and the real world in on them. 'I need to speak to the funeral director and get the ball rolling. I can't put it off.'

She might as well have tipped a bucket of ice water over them. He couldn't compete with a funeral.

'Okay,' he said, watching as she slipped out from the covers and began getting dressed. After a moment, he rose too, climbing into his boxers. 'Then I'll come with you. Give you some support.'

She looked up from buttoning her jeans. 'No, really, it's okay. I'll be fine. Thanks, though.'

She saw him detect the shift in atmosphere, her pull away, splitting her day from his.

There was a long pause.

'Okay, well … I guess I'll get on with some work here, then.'

She nodded. 'Okay.'

He watched as she pulled on her boots. He seemed unaware that he was still shirtless in the arctic temperatures, waiting for her to look over at him. But she didn't. She couldn't. This had been an interlude, a fleeting escape from the worst of days. It wasn't real life.

'Dulcie,' he said, coming over and standing in front of her, the calm to her growing haste as her fingers fumbled the shirt buttons. 'What's going on?'

'I told you, I need to get on. I've got to calls to make, people I need to let know.'

'… I mean with us.'

'Us?' She gave him a blank look that belied the frantic thudding of her heart.

'Shall I still come over tonight, when I'm done here?'

‘Sure.’ Her voice rose an octave. ‘Of course. The offer still stands. This is not an acceptable living arrangement,’ she said, flicking her eyes towards the tarp. ‘I’d say sue the landlord, but seeing as it now appears to be … well, me …’ She winced. ‘I’ll speak to the lawyer when I’m on with her today and find out what’s going on with this grant. But in the meantime, the garage flat is yours. As long as you need it.’

She saw the look that crossed his face at the mention of the garage flat. It was clear he had thought – hoped – to stay in her bed tonight.

He nodded, seeming to read the situation at last. This had been a mistake.

‘Right.’

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the lips. But it was platonic, almost chaste, far from the hungry invitation of a few hours earlier. ‘Thank you, Alé.’

‘What are you thanking me for?’

She shrugged. ‘… For everything. You’ve been a good friend.’

He didn’t reply to that, simply watching as she crossed the space to retrieve her coat.

‘I’ll see you later, then,’ she said into the silence, showing herself out.

The next week passed in a blur. Her grandmother had planned a funeral grander than most weddings, and although she had already put many arrangements in place Dulcie’s days were still taken up with endless meetings – the minister, florists, caterers – and calls to the friends and dignitaries in her grandmother’s Cartier leather address book. She was run off her feet and she was glad of it; she didn’t want to have time to think, much less feel the gaping loss in the middle of her life.

The house felt empty without her grandmother’s presence, but the void was temporarily filled at least by the teams of professionals setting up for the reception after the funeral service. Urns were frothing with cut flowers once more; Helda’s fresh pine swags garlanding the stairs had been filled out with pink hypericum berries; and the Christmas tree – now elegantly decorated with claret velvet ribbons and cream candles – dominated the reception hall. The house had come alive in the shadow of her grandmother’s death.

The evenings were quieter. Dulcie would sit in the kitchen with Helda and Georges, shelling peas or playing chess, talking all the while as they reminisced about old times. Half their conversations started with: ‘Do you

remember when …?’ But they never said: ‘What will we do when …?’ The future they had all dreaded had finally arrived but it seemed to be taking place within a swirling fog, offering no clear view of the way forward.

Alejandro was keeping his distance. He had understood her message perfectly that afternoon in the studio, and for two days afterwards he hadn’t come back to the estate at all. It was only when a storm had come in, ripping the tarp from the roof in the middle of the night, that he had been reluctantly forced to return. (Helda had learnt of the details when she’d hurried over with a breakfast tray the next morning.)

He didn’t come to the main house, and Dulcie felt both his proximity and his absence. She couldn’t sleep most nights – grief had her both restless and listless – and she took to standing at the window of the yellow bedroom, watching his shadow passing over the garage-flat walls. He would always arrive late, after the lights were off in the villa, and leave again before breakfast, the only proof of his brief residency being Helda’s dinner tray left cleared at the bottom of the outdoor steps each morning.

Dulcie didn’t blame him for avoiding her. She had even tried to help him get away. Her lawyer had pressured the executors of the Foundation to contact the builders and offer a generous bonus if they completed the new roof ‘asap’. But the message had come back that this wasn’t a matter of lack of will; for all the incentive in the world, they simply couldn’t make inroads against the full might of a Swiss winter. Blizzards and high winds contravened worker safety requirements, and they had to wait for a window in the weather.

He was stuck here until then.

She walked into the drawing room, where Helda had told her the decorator was finishing up, repainting the room after the water damage from Dulcie’s incident with the bath. He was the last man standing for getting everything ready for the reception; the electrician had been delayed on another project, pushing back the start for the painting. Now there was a strong odour of emulsion filling the room, but at least the lights were back on without constant flickering. There would be more than a hundred people coming through the doors tomorrow; Dulcie hoped they would be mostly contained in the ballroom but some overspill was almost certain, especially for older guests who might need to sit down.

‘Don’t worry, it’ll dry overnight,’ the decorator said, seeing her glance at the glistening surface of the still-wet walls.

She nodded, well used to working on site from her job. Still, they wouldn't be able to rehang everything before tomorrow. All the furniture had been moved into the centre of the room and was covered with dustsheets. Helda had assured her everything would be ready, dressed and sparkling, before they left for church in the morning, but it was going to be tight.

'It looks great, Philippe,' she said as he collapsed his ladder. 'I hadn't realized just how much the room needed a refresh until you started on it.'

'Yes, it's a lot brighter now. I was surprised too,' he said, squinting around at his own handiwork. 'I've never worked in here. I don't think the room has been touched in years.' He had been doing work at Villa Mirelle for nigh-on three decades now. 'So I went over the watermarks three times,' he said, walking to the wall and peering closely for any faint stains. 'They should be fine now, but of course we haven't had the drying times I would have liked between coats. Let me know if they start coming through, and I'll come back next week.'

'I will; thank you. And thank you for fitting us in at such short notice.'

'I'm glad to have been able to do one last thing for madame,' he said, lifting the groundsheets from the floor and carefully pulling the dustsheets off the tables and consoles, paintings and armchairs all grouped in a muddle together. Bundling them under his arm, he picked up the ladder as if it was a Birkin.

'I'll see you tomorrow, then,' he said, tipping his head to Dulcie as she handed him his cash payment.

'Thank you, Philippe; see you tomorrow.' Almost all their tradesmen were coming to the funeral too. They had benefited from years of loyalty from her grandmother, and people from all walks of life wanted to pay their respects.

'It looks very good in here now,' Helda said, sounding pleased, joining her a few moments later after she'd seen him out.

'Yes, doesn't it? It really was more tired than I'd realized. What a relief he got finished in time.'

'Philippe would never let us down. He'd have worked through the night if he'd had to.'

'He's a trouper.'

'Some tea?'

‘Lovely. I’ll be through in just a minute,’ she murmured, admiring the fresh, clean walls. The room felt so much larger—

‘Oh God!’ She realized something suddenly as she looked around. Where had everything been hanging? It had been easy to tell before, sunlight having bleached the plaster around the frames as negative shadows; but now the marks had been painted over and the gallery arrangement obscured. Too late, she realized she ought to have taken some photographs before everything was removed.

‘Dammit,’ she muttered to herself. How many paintings needed to be rehung, exactly? If they had to start again from scratch … Gallerying a wall was time-consuming, more of a mathematical equation than an aesthetic exercise, and they would be pressed for time in the morning as it was.

She walked over to where the artworks had been stacked on the sofas and armchairs, safely out of the way; it had been too risky leaving them on the floor where feet might unwittingly tread, or drinks be spilled. She flicked through them, reminding herself of what was there. They had been hanging on the walls her entire life so that she saw them without ever really seeing them. Her grandmother’s enormous portrait was easy, of course, on the back wall, but …

‘Ah, yes,’ she murmured to herself, recognizing the miniature seascapes that hung to the left of the reading lamp; and the quartet of Georgian portraits went on the return walls either side of the French doors. The distinctive whitish-grey oil she knew, of course; that sat centrally above the serpentine console—

Her fingers stopped their tread over the gilt frames as her gaze caught on something unexpected tucked in at the back.

Her heart began to thud as she recognized it immediately for what it was.

A final whisper from the grave.

It was after midnight when the garage-flat lights spilled onto the courtyard, throwing the frozen fountain into bright relief against the night; but Dulcie was waiting, in her shoes and coat, watching from the hall window. She gave him a few minutes to get settled, then ran up the steps and stood outside the door, hand poised in the air as she summoned her nerve. She could hear music playing inside, the sounds of him moving about. She wondered how his day had been – good? Bad? … Lonely?

She knocked, stepping back with her breath held as she waited.

It felt like an age before he answered. No doubt he could guess it was her, waiting for him out here in the perishing cold. Why would he hurry?

Eventually the door opened.

'… Dulcie.'

'Hi.'

She saw the coldness in his eyes immediately. 'It's late.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I just saw the lights come on, and I … I wondered if I could talk to you about something?'

'No.'

She blinked, taken aback by his bluntness. '… Wh—what?'

'No, you can't talk to me about something.' He began to close the door again. 'Goodnight.'

'Alé, wait!'

But the door had already clicked on the latch.

'Fuck!' she whispered, staring at a knot in the wood in disbelief. He hated her now. He actually hated her. It was a devastating thought – and completely reasonable on his part. She would hate her, too, if the tables were turned.

She stood there for a minute more, debating knocking again and begging to be heard out, but she made herself turn away. She had been an idiot to think—

'… What is it?'

She turned in surprise, halfway down the stairs. Alejandro was standing at the top, holding a beer and looking down at her mutinously. He had never looked so good.

She swallowed. 'It's this. I just found it behind a painting in the drawing room.' She hesitated, then ran back up again and held out the folded sheet of paper.

But he didn't take it. She saw the flicker of interest in his eyes, but he wouldn't be drawn. 'It's your business, Dulcie, not mine.'

They both knew she had made sure of that.

'Won't you at least read it?'

'I'm not getting involved—'

'Please, Alé.'

He frowned as he heard her voice break. He took the paper and unfolded it, his gaze tracking left to right several times, his breath swelling his chest as he read and reread the words that had just terrified her.

I’m blown. Get rid of the ring. Don’t trust Wagstaff.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY

Bol d'Or Regatta, Lake Geneva
13 June 1963

It was the first day of the rest of his life, but there was nothing to show it except a half-smile on his lips as he walked through the crowds, the wind at his back. No one could tell what held him apart from them as he strolled through the town, heading – like everyone else – for the yacht club. The regatta was one of the greatest events in the nautical calendar and a highlight of the Swiss social scene; even this early in the morning, with several hours before the starting bell rang, the lake was stippled with yachts.

Rain was forecast for later but already dark clouds were bumping across the steepled Alps beyond the opposite shore. Bunting flapped loudly from lamp posts in the gathering gusts, gulls wheeling daredevil arcs in a tempestuous sky. It was difficult to know how to dress – the women were mainly bare-legged in summer dresses but with cardigans; the men in chinos, no socks, jumpers tied over their shoulders.

He was walking behind a small family, the mother pushing a baby in a pram, the little boy pleading with his father for ice-cream for breakfast. He listened in on their quiet murmurings, noticing their shared looks, aware of their family connectedness in a way they weren't. To them, it was just another day. To them, they were unremarkable. But they had never stood on the outside of things; they had only ever belonged.

His smile grew broader as he looked down at the bunch of peonies flittering in his arms. They were a first, tentative public proclamation of a private truth, the keys to a door he had been waiting to open for too long—

An accent distinguished itself in the crowd, catching his ear the way sunlight on water caught the eye: glinting, glancing flashes of recognition. He looked around, but he already knew to whom it belonged, and his eyes came to rest on two familiar figures standing by the clubhouse, both smoking as they talked intently, heads bent together.

He was unaware they had ever been close but time had slipped past, of course, since Paris. Nothing stayed the same – friendships faded, others bloomed. Still, it surprised him for reasons he couldn't quite name.

He decided to go over and shake hands. He would see them later anyway, but visibility was the point of today. Reintegration. Why wait?

He moved to cross but the tring of a bell alerted him to a boy approaching on his bicycle, a chicken in a crate tied to the handlebars. He waited for the boy to pass, still watching his former acquaintances at a remove – one was talking with passion, with purpose, hand twirling and gesticulating a point; the other was silent and seemingly unmoved, before reaching into their coat and pulling out something bright. Golden.

Even from a distance, he recognized the ring immediately.

He froze as he watched them examine it before it was dropped back into the pocket again. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing, to rationalize how it could be that they now had it, but there was only one possible explanation: they had always had it.

And yet it couldn't be. It pulled the entire world inside out. What he had done – been made to do—

'Excuse me.'

Mannered irritation as a woman pushed past him. He had become a rock in a stream, his feet planted so that the crowds had to split to flow around him. But he couldn't move, couldn't take his eyes off the two of them. He knew collusion when he saw it.

'Excuse me. Do you mind?'

He stumbled out of the slipstream and off to the side, into the shadow of the trees. Instinct told him to hide. Intuition told him there was no such thing as coincidence. The truth was right before him. He had only to recognize it as such.

Looking downwards, the flowers now a screen to obscure his face, he drew closer and stopped behind a sycamore, not more than ten feet from where they stood. He turned his back and lit a cigarette, nonchalant as he listened in with a thudding heart.

‘… to be hasty about this.’

‘You were there. You heard it as well as m … become a liability, running his mouth like that. You know we can’t risk it when he’s already ducked out on us once before.’

A silence drew out as a plume of smoke curled between them.

‘… It’s a shame, though. I thought it was all cut and dried.’

‘… I still do. I think it can be salvaged.’

Tutting. ‘How are you still an optimist after all these years?’

‘Flies in the face of reason, I grant you, but I’ve seen it happen.’

A sigh. ‘It’s too late.’

‘It’s never too late—’

‘I mean, there’s nothing I can … the order’s come in.’

‘Then call them off.’

‘It’s already … n play.’

‘Jesus!’

His ears strained on the voice break, hearing the man’s shock. Their voices faded in and out of range as they glanced around every few moments, but not with any real concern; they didn’t expect him to be here. From a passer-by’s perspective, they seemed relaxed, as if they were discussing the weather rather than a man’s fate.

His fate.

His heart was beginning to feel like it would burst from his chest, his limbs weakening with fear, the happy summer’s morning leaching into a ringing cold winter as panic began to set in.

Nothing was as he had thought it was. Nor who. But that didn’t matter now. He knew his true enemy’s face. The question was – what was he going to do about it?

‘… we don’t act, he’ll … into the wind agai … We were lucky to get the break we did.’

‘I know, but—’

‘… He’s proven to be erratic, unpredictable. Too high risk. You know we have to neutralize the situation.’

His mind raced as every sinew in his body quivered. He felt the animal part of his brain twitch. Survival was now a choice, no longer a given.

A silence drew out.

Without moving his head – no sudden movements – he looked around him; his gaze swung like a sunbeam through the dappled lanes of trees,

casting over the pale faces sitting outside the cafés, tripping over the bodies in the excited crowd heading for the yacht club … trying to find the fixed point of a pair of eyes fastened upon him. Unblinking, indefatigable, highly trained. Sniper dots?

But they weren't here. He wasn't expected here. Not yet.

Home, then. It would only have taken a few calls to establish he'd never set foot in Rotterdam; but his new address had been given right to them.

We would spend our summers making jumps in the field by your stables – do you remember, down by the lake?

Had they worked it out? Seen through his porcelain lies? Were they hiding out this very moment, lying in wait for him?

He understood at once that he could never go back.

'Hey, don't go quiet on me.'

'I'm not, I just …'

'I don't like it any more than you do, bu … not personal. This is bigger than all of us.'

Another sigh. 'At least promise me, no collateral damage.'

Leo's head snapped up.

'… You know I can't promise that—'

The cigarette fell from his grasp as he felt the world contract to the tiny, glowing stub by his toes. His focus returned with immediate intensity. He could be a coward for his own life, but not Lise's. Not their daughter's.

He had to warn her. Make sure she stayed away, no matter what. Because he knew her – she would do anything for him. She already had.

He stared at the cut flowers in his arms: beautiful and delicate … but already dying. The future he had dared to dream had just slipped from his grasp. He let them fall and walked away, against the crowd, heading back towards the outside of things again.

Forty minutes later, he was crouched by the gate, his body concealed by the stone wall as he looked down at the old stables. The building stood quietly in its bucolic setting, geese pecking in the old yard, the lake stretching away behind it like a silver carpet. He had been here fifteen minutes now and nothing had stirred but a quarrelsome wind, tussling the asters and the globeflowers in the long grass.

Slowly he rose. Against the odds, events were falling in his favour: he had placed the warning at Villa Mirelle and still made it here first. He

grabbed the broken reading glasses from the dirt and pressed the plastic frames into the narrow gap between the stones atop the wall, his other hand pushing on the gate. The hinge squeaked and the geese looked up, ready to cackle and rush, but recognition muted their surprise. He stepped through.

Suddenly they rose up, their wings beating and necks stretched as they rushed forward as a flock. Angry and aggressive, they were an intimidating army. He stopped in confusion. He alone could approach without clamour. That was the whole point—

He realized the truth a second too late and turned to see who had been hiding behind the ancient beech – but he never saw their face. He was an amateur in a field of pros, out of his depth from the very start, and the club came down with skilled efficiency.

He fell to the ground.

‘Threat neutralized,’ said a man’s voice in the darkness. An accent. The crackle of a radio.

Distantly, he heard the geese honking furiously, pecking at the hands that grabbed and dragged him over the ground. But the squeak of the gate bought their silence. Just like that, their threat had been removed too, and a familiar peace fell again over the yard. His fingertips brushed the asters still nodding in the long grass …

And the world faded to black.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Lake Geneva
12 December 2026

The fox was back in the henhouse.

Dulcie could see Wagstaff across the room as she chatted with the last remaining guests. He was so tall – even stooped with age, he was like a flagpole, catching the eye from all corners as he talked easily. It was easy to imagine him in the diplomatic world, always armed with a story and a charming smile. They had spoken briefly at the church; he had seemed mindful that her time today was stretched, but he was the only person to whom she wanted to speak.

She crossed the parquet floor, exhausted and relieved that what had been a sea of people all afternoon was now reduced to just a few puddles of local friends. She had done her duty and spoken to every single guest – in the church, after the burial, here as she greeted them in the reception hall. The mourners, chic in black, had offered their condolences, then admired the extravagant flowers and refined tree, indulged in the canapés and Pol Roger, mingling in the mirrored ballroom as the hum of conversation and laughter steadily rose; life riding on the very heels of death.

It had felt more like a party than a funeral, but that had been her grandmother's intention. Dulcie remembered her once saying that funerals were 'the new weddings' for her age group: an opportunity to catch up on news. All day Dulcie had listened to conversations about grandchildren, second marriages, third divorces, jobs, lost jobs, retirement, widowhood … She noted that these stories of lives being lived continued long beyond the supposed happy-ever-afters.

That had been her grandmother's fate, certainly. The headlines of her life didn't touch the actual emotional heft of it. She had been a daughter and a mother, an Olympian, a fashion plate and an ambassador's wife. She had been married twice, widowed once, divorced once. But her biggest love story – arguably the defining event of her life – lay buried beneath all of that, a secret in the shadows. How many people here knew of the heartbreak she had really lived with for over sixty years? Many? A few? Or just the one?

Alejandro was still talking politely with some gentlemen in a corner. She wasn't forgiven; far from it. He hadn't been able to offer any insights last night; the note was as much a riddle to him as to her, and she'd only succeeded in frustrating them both. So it had been a surprise when he'd turned up at the church service this morning. He'd kept his distance, sitting at the back, and she hadn't seen him at the interment – but then he had come for the reception and remained here all afternoon. She had felt his eyes on her, keeping watch just as she kept tabs on the elderly Englishman.

His head lifted now as she passed by and stood beside Wagstaff.

'How is everyone?' she asked, placing a hand on his arm and seeing how he turned with that winning smile, always ready to greet – or make – his next friend.

'Dulcie, what a triumph this has been,' he said. 'Beautiful. Overcrowded. Your grandmother would have loved it!'

'I hope so,' she smiled. 'She was very particular about the wines being served, and no ice in the champagne.'

'She did so loathe that,' he drawled. 'And rightly so.'

'… Wags, do you have a moment?'

'Of course!'

'There's something I'd like to show you in the music room.'

'How intriguing! Lead the way.'

Dulcie heard him taking his leave of the others with expressions of regret, making everyone feel special as he trailed behind her. They exited the ballroom together, her heels and his polished leather shoes sounding on the ancient oak as they fell into step, walking slowly down the bedecked hall, the Christmas tree noble and proud behind them. Helda had excelled herself: yet more fresh greenery was wound around the stair bannisters, thick foliage displays sprouted from every mantelpiece, tall ivory candles flickered in the windows. The place smelled of pine and woodsmoke,

nutmeg and cloves. The silver photograph frames, holding pictures of the people Dulcie had loved most in this world, had been polished to a particularly high shine, their beautiful faces captured in perpetuity, and memories crowded Dulcie of Christmases past, dinner parties, birthdays, lazy snowy afternoons and sunny mornings. She felt her family's ghosts gliding through the rooms, still alive here somehow. Had everything they'd ever known been a lie?

Only this man knew.

She opened the door to the music room with a smile. It was quiet and rarely used, tucked away in the north-eastern corner of the house. Even with a houseful of guests, they wouldn't have been disturbed here.

'I say,' he murmured.

She watched as he cast admiring looks around at the celadon silk walls, the baby-blue sofas, the gleaming Steinway in the middle of the room, the cello and harp by the window; it was as if he'd never seen them before. As if he hadn't been in here. But he had. He had been everywhere in the course of his visit. All over the house …

He turned to Dulcie with an expectant, open look. The kindly older man. The archetypal English gentleman.

A killer.

'This room is like a treasure box. But what exactly is it I am looking for?' he asked.

'I was hoping you would tell me that.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Who are you, Wags? Who are you really?'

He hesitated. '… You know who—'

'No, I know only what you've told me: that you're Granny's old friend from her glory days in Paris. But you're more than that. Or not even that; I can't tell which.' She shrugged. 'But I do know you didn't turn up on the doorstep because there was something you wanted to tell my grandmother. You turned up because there was something here that you were looking for. That's why Helda found you wandering around the house, pretending to be confused.'

He blinked. 'Well, I'm certainly confused now.' He looked around, his gaze falling to the sofas. '… Would you mind awfully if I took the weight off?'

‘By all means,’ she replied, watching as he slid into his ‘elderly’ act, not for the first time; his advanced age was a convenience to him when he needed it to be. But she wouldn’t be deterred this time. He could stall and defer all he liked. They weren’t leaving this room until she had answers.

‘I’m afraid my bones are turning to powder,’ he murmured as he shuffled over. ‘It’s something of a challenge standing for too long.’

‘Powder?’

‘Bone cancer. Last gasps of … blessedly.’ He sank into the chair with a wince and muffled groan.

Was that true? Was he really dying? She saw the pain on his face but she wasn’t sure she believed a word that came out of his mouth.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ she replied in a muted voice.

‘Why? It had to be something. God knows, I don’t want to go on and on. All my fun people are gone now. Life rather loses its razzle-dazzle by this stage.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything before?’

He arched an eyebrow. ‘And add to your woes? You were dealing with quite enough, young lady.’

She looked down, feeling conflicted. She didn’t want to feel pity for him, see him as a victim. She had read that note, and she couldn’t pretend he was harmless. No matter how much she had liked him.

‘Dulcie, what is it?’ He was watching her now. ‘What’s troubling you?’

She reached into the pocket of her black silk dress and pulled out the folded sheet of paper. *Lise* was written across the back in pencil.

‘I found this last night wedged into the back of a painting in the drawing room – the one with Leo Santos’s signature written in the bottom right corner …’ She gave a small wince of annoyance; she had recognized the name before she had ever heard it in her grandmother’s bedroom, but years of seeing it had blinded her to it. ‘I can’t believe you missed it. You were sitting in that room for days. Surely that’s the first place a spy would look?’

His eyes flickered towards her at the mention of the S-word. There was a pause. ‘You’re right. If I were a spy, I’d have known.’

She watched him with reluctant admiration as he wriggled smoothly away from the accusation. But of course he would, if he was a masterful deceiver.

‘Can I read it?’ he asked, reaching out a hand.

‘And give you the opportunity to destroy it? No.’

‘Why should I wish to destroy it?’

‘Because it implicates you.’

‘In what?’

‘In Leo Santos’s murder.’

He gave a perplexed look as he sat back in the chair. There was no warmth in her eyes, her words cold. Outwardly she was stone, but within, her blood was rushing, her heart thudding fast. Was it the same for him? He looked completely unperturbed.

‘The Russians killed Leo – or had him killed. That’s a matter of public record.’

‘No, it’s a cover story. Leo wrote this note to warn Granny, telling her not to trust *you*.’

‘He said that?’ He sounded hurt.

She didn’t reply, denying him the satisfaction of knowing, just yet, exactly what it said. He hid his cleverness so well, behind deference, charm, modesty, even senility when it suited him. She had to find a way to get him off balance and keep him wobbling.

There was another pause, but she could feel the change between them beginning to solidify; their fledgling affection couldn’t stand up to outright accusations and slurs. Friendliness faded fast in the face of hostility. ‘Well, if I was such a danger to her, I obviously wasn’t very good at my job. She spent sixty-odd years living here, evading me at this beautiful shorefront villa she’d once invited me to.’

Her eyes narrowed at his flippancy. ‘My God, Granny’s dead, Wags! We put her in the ground today, after she’d spent a lifetime not knowing what happened to the man she loved, the father of her child … She never recovered from it! It haunted her in her final moments. And you can’t even give her the respect of being honest about what you did?’

‘My dear, you are distressed. It’s been a long and emotional day. Perfectly understandable,’ Wagstaff demurred. ‘Let me read it. You’ve misunderstood, whatever it says. I’m sure this can be sorted out if we all have the facts. What is it I’m supposed to have done?’

His eyes lifted suddenly to a point behind her, and she turned to see Alejandro standing in the doorway. His timing couldn’t have been worse.

‘I was looking all over for you,’ he said.

‘Alé, Wags and I are just in the middle of something.’ Her voice was clipped, betraying her nerves.

‘Good. Because I was looking for him too.’

She watched as he closed the door and came into the room. Did he intend to be the moral support he hadn’t been last night? Her protector against a nonagenarian?

She watched as Alejandro reached into his jacket pocket and set down a dilapidated pair of reading glasses, the tortoiseshell frame faded and broken. His stare was fixed upon Wagstaff, reading his reaction – but there was none. ‘I went back to the studio after the service today. These prove what you are and why you really came here.’

‘… You think I was looking for some old reading glasses?’

‘Alé, what are you doing?’ she asked in a low voice.

He looked straight at her, holding her in his brown eyes, no hint of a wink today, but something else instead. Something tender. ‘During the service, I was thinking over everything that happened the day before your grandmother died. I remembered something she said as we were leaving.’

Dulcie frowned, trying to think back. There had been so much chaos. ‘What … what did she say?’

‘She said “the glasses were there”. That they were the signal … It made no sense at the time, obviously. A signal for what? Who needs a signal?’ He shrugged. ‘Not ordinary people. But Leo Santos wasn’t ordinary. Wags told us he was a spy.’

‘And he was,’ Wagstaff muttered. ‘Albeit a pretty abysmal one—’

‘I suddenly remembered seeing these glasses wedged in between the stones in the wall by the gate,’ Alejandro said, still looking at her, shutting the old man out. ‘I’ve seen them a hundred times without ever thinking about them—’

Like her and the Santos painting. Hidden in plain sight.

‘—I thought they were just old junk that had been picked up and put out of the way of the geese.’ He held up his phone to show a photograph taken of them in situ too. The glasses were glaringly, obscurely out of place, yet inconspicuous too. Dulcie thought she might remember seeing them there herself, now that she looked at them.

Spycraft.

He lowered his voice. ‘The note changes everything. It shows us Santos wasn’t just living at l’Hermitage; he was hiding out there. It explains the geese too – they would alert him to any intruders without being conspicuous. Even the fact they were written into the terms and conditions

of the tenancy meant it read as a contractual obligation rather than a personal precaution … If anyone was looking that hard.' He took a breath. 'I think the glasses were a signal between the two of them – maybe for whether it was safe for her to come down to the studio? Or not?' He shrugged.

Dulcie sat back, trying to take it all in. She looked down at the note still in her hand; she had scarcely slept, trying to work out why it was telling her grandmother not to trust her old friend.

'What's your role in this, Wags?' she asked bluntly. 'Was Santos running from you?'

'No.'

'This suggests he was.' She unfolded the sheet of paper and held it up for him to read. The handwriting was a scrawl, the words written at an angle, in evident haste …

I'm blown. Get rid of the ring. Don't trust Wagstaff.

'You froze when you saw that picture of the ring in the box of photographs,' she said. 'A photograph that just so happened to go missing afterwards. Why did you take it, Wags?'

'I didn't.'

'Had Granny kept it as some sort of insurance policy? Something she could hold over *you*?' Dulcie had sorted through her grandmother's jewellery last night after reading the note. It wasn't here. In all likelihood, she had never had it for more than a few hours; she knew from past conversations with her grandmother that much of her jewellery in Paris had been loaned to her. The missing photograph – and the one with Nureyev – might have been the only proof she ever had of wearing it.

But why would she need proof?

'How many times must I say it? I was a bureaucrat. A pen-pusher. Not a spy.'

'You said at breakfast that the secret services always "get you" by holding something over you: an affair … being queer …' Alejandro lifted an eyebrow knowingly.

You always snaffle the most handsome ones! Her grandmother had outed him before them all.

'That's how they got you. You are a spook, and that note proves it.'

'It proves nothing other than that a dear friend was deceived!' Wagstaff clapped back as finally, for a moment, the mask dropped. Dulcie heard the

sudden steel in his voice, saw the arrogance flash in his eyes. Her instincts had been correct: he was more than he pretended to be.

But was he worse too?

'The thing is, Wags, Granny never received this note – so she never got rid of the ring. It's upstairs.' That was a lie, but he wasn't the only one here who could bluff. 'Was that what you were after? You asked me not once, but twice, whether Granny had kept her jewellery. Were you trying to find the ring?'

'I don't know what ring you're talking about.'

'I think you do. It's very distinctive. Huge, domed, gold cocktail-style? She's also wearing it in a photograph in the drawing room, in fact – she's standing next to Nureyev at the Paris Opera … Why was it the cause of all her troubles?'

He shrugged. 'It wasn't.'

'Her last words to me were about the ring. You think I'd forget them?' Her eyes were cold as she held up her fingers and counted off the facts. 'Santos was a Soviet spy. Granny said she knew he was a Soviet spy. She said she regretted ever wearing the ring. The note tells her to get rid of the ring. It tells her not to trust you. You were a spy. Santos was running from you.' She stared back at him, seven fingers held up with inescapable truths. 'What happened?'

Still Wagstaff did not blink. 'I cannot keep repeating myself.'

'No. We're not asking you to repeat your lies either,' Alejandro said. 'We want the real story.'

Another silence. Endless. Dulcie watched him with rising fear. He had kept his counsel all these years. Why should he break now?

'Wags, you've just told me you're dying!' she cried. If cold, hard facts wouldn't stir him, would emotion? 'And there's no one left in the world who loves me. If I have nothing else, at the very least I deserve to know the truth about my own family. You're the only person left who can tell me. Please, I know you're an honourable man.'

His eyes met hers at that. *Honour.* He prided himself on it. Defined himself by it.

He suddenly looked even older than his many years and she thought she saw something give, deep inside him, like a tether finally snapping under unbearable weight.

‘… It’s not what you think,’ he said, his voice barely more than a murmur.

‘Then tell me,’ she pleaded.

It was several moments before he moved to speak. Dulcie could see the iterations running over his face – where to start? Where to finish? – as if it wasn’t easy to move from under a lifetime of secrets.

‘You have to understand what the world was facing in that summer,’ he said finally. ‘We were creeping towards a precipice.’

‘The Cuban Missile Crisis. Yeah, we know,’ Alejandro said.

‘No, you don’t. That’s precisely the point.’ Wagstaff looked back at them both. ‘The Bay of Pigs invasion had been an unmitigated disaster for America. Kennedy had just come to power, but the plan had been formulated under Eisenhower. The intel passed to JFK was subpar and off the pace; the US troops should never have gone in when they did. But they did, and they lost, and Kennedy took the heat for it. To say it eroded his trust in his own chiefs of staff would be a vast understatement.’

‘Okay,’ Alejandro shrugged.

‘Meanwhile, despite the very public diplomatic negotiations that went on in the aftermath, led by James Donovan, we were gathering evidence behind the scenes—’

‘We?’ Alejandro pushed.

‘The British.’

‘… MI6?’

Wagstaff simply blinked. ‘We were gathering evidence of an ongoing and escalating Soviet presence in Cuba; we had men on the ground there. At the beginning of that August, a – let’s say “unusual” – Soviet ship had docked near Pinar del Río and no one was allowed near it. We were convinced they were unloading nuclear warheads, and we shared these suspicions with the CIA.

‘A few weeks later, one of their routine surveillance flights picked up images of surface-to-air missiles there, confirming the intel. But Kennedy – burnt from the Bay of Pigs – refused to action a further response. The CIA were impotent. That’s where Santos came in. His socialist leanings made him vaguely sympathetic to the Soviet cause, helping us to “sell” him to them as an asset. His affair with Lise provided them with the leverage they needed to force him to comply, but all things considered, it wasn’t too much of an ask, given his private political sympathies.’

‘Blackmailing a man into espionage wasn’t “too much of an ask”?’ Alejandro sneered.

Wagstaff looked at them for a long moment: two young people in their prime, belonging to a different age. ‘Sometimes tough decisions have to be made. It may be difficult for you to understand the magnitude of the situation at that time, but there was a very clear direction of travel towards actual nuclear war. It was becoming critical – it was entirely unprecedented – and the leader of the free world was in a sulk. He had to be brought to his senses. The CIA understood that.’

There was a stunned silence.

Dulcie blinked. ‘Are you saying … the CIA orchestrated the leak in order to deliberately set up the President of the United States?’

‘It worked. There’s no doubt the operation was a critical success.’

Dulcie was quiet for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts. There was so much to absorb. She didn’t know what she had expected, but not this. How could anyone have expected this?

She looked at the note, fallen now on the coffee table between them. ‘Did Santos know?’

‘No. MI6 had a Soviet double agent handling his interactions with Markov. Leo believed he was a Russian asset. It was safer for him that way.’

‘So, then, why does his note warn Granny not to trust you?’

Wagstaff’s gaze fell to the upside-down scrawl. Caught out.

‘He obviously did know he was working for you – or the Americans, whoever,’ she pressed. ‘Why are you still lying?’

‘I’m not. I’m not.’ Wagstaff was quiet for a moment. ‘Look, I don’t have all the answers, even now. I don’t know how he discovered the truth. But yes, if he wrote that, then at some point he must have found out.’

‘And was that point right before he died?’ Alejandro asked.

‘What?’

‘Did you kill him?’ Alejandro asked bluntly.

‘No!’ Wagstaff’s voice was sharp. ‘That was neither my call nor my doing.’

Dulcie watched their tense interaction.

‘Why does he tell Granny to get rid of the ring?’ she asked, drawing Wagstaff’s attention back to her.

‘… Because it connected her to the leak.’

‘How?’

There was a long pause, and Dulcie felt her chest tighten. *If I had never worn it, everything would have been different.*

‘Your grandmother was involved. She didn’t just know what Leo was doing. She helped him do it.’

A gasp of shock escaped her. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘It’s true. Once Lise found out the truth, she insisted on being a part of it.’

Dulcie blinked. ‘… What exactly did she do?’

‘*She* was the one who smuggled the memo out of the embassy. We had a logistical problem: Leo’s affair with Lise could get him into the Swiss embassy, and even into Valentin’s office, but not out again. Every person – be they visitor or employee – entering and exiting the embassy was subjected to X-rays and physical searches. Only the ambassador and his wife were exempt.

‘The CIA already had someone on the inside working as their eyes and ears. They were able to transpose photographs of the memos onto tiny microfiches which were then wound up inside a specially made ring. Lise wore it to the ballet, dropped it at an assigned spot and swapped it for a solid replica. It was picked up by a Soviet mark, and that was it – her job was done.’

‘Did she know what was inside the ring?’ Alejandro asked.

‘Not the pertinent details. The less she knew, the better.’

‘You make it sound like it was nothing!’ Dulcie cried. ‘Wear a ring, and that was it – her job done. But the next day, Kennedy was crucified in newspapers across the world and her husband killed himself as a result!’

Wagstaff closed his eyes. ‘That was highly regrettable. No one had envisaged he would fall on his sword. Valentin was never the target; it was about forcing Kennedy’s hand. I had always personally liked him, but—’

‘My God, you are so two-faced!’ she cried. ‘You say you liked him? And my grandmother? But you lied to their faces about being their friend!’

‘I was always your grandmother’s friend, but all warfare is based on deception, Dulcie, and the stakes had never been higher. In spite of any ethical misgivings you may have about my actions, the operation was a huge success – and will be regarded as such by the wider world too when the files are declassified forty years from now.’

Another forty years? One-hundred-year sealed files. Wagstaff’s eyes flickered towards Alejandro; his accusation at breakfast the other day had

hit on the truth after all. Wagstaff really had been particularly sensational.

Dulcie stared at him: so self-righteous, so absolutely certain of his convictions. He was formidable, a man who didn't make mistakes. A chess player in a world of checkers.

'Tell me something, Wags … Was Granny your target all along?'

He looked askance at her.

'If the CIA already had someone inside the embassy, then why did they need Leo? You said they needed someone to get the information out. He couldn't do that … It was never him you were interested in, was it? The way you talk about him, you knew he was hopeless. He was just your way of hooking her in. You knew she'd do anything for the man she loved.'

There was a long moment before he exhaled heavily. '… I knew she could do it.'

Dulcie's hands went to her mouth, appalled that she was right.

'There was far more to her than people saw. She was underestimated because she was beautiful and rich and young; they didn't seem to see – or much care – that she was also principled, clever, loyal. But I did. And I knew she would make a far better spy than he could ever be—'

Dulcie felt her pulse accelerate as finally she got the admission she had needed. Her grandmother had been recruited by the British government in an orchestrated campaign to bring her into the fold.

'When I ran into her at the Rodin museum that day, it was a test. I was tailing Markov, who was intercepting Leo for the first time, but I wanted to see how she would react to keep me from seeing her there with her lover.' He nodded to himself as he sank back into the memories. 'She was brilliant, of course, kept her head. She was strong-willed and as skilled a diplomat as any of the dignitaries in her ballroom; she could keep cool in a crisis, hide her tears behind a smile … So yes, she was always the principal target. But I also knew she'd never go along with it without an exceptional reason.'

'Love?'

He nodded. 'We manipulated the timing of one of Markov's drops to Santos so that she would see they were in collusion. The rest was down to her. I was confident she would confront him.'

Dulcie blinked. 'Did Leo know it was a set-up?'

'Absolutely not. He was no actor. Wore his emotions on his sleeve. But Lissy understood at once the risks he faced if he was caught smuggling classified material from Valentin's office. She insisted he involve her.'

There was a pause. ‘And in saving her lover, she killed her husband.’

‘Valentin died by his own hand; of his own volition. We must remember that,’ Wagstaff said quickly. ‘But it was still a dreadful shock for everyone. Unforeseen.’ He frowned, looking pained again.

Suddenly Dulcie understood her grandmother’s distress in her bedroom that day, her guilt as she insisted she had killed him. ‘How did Granny take it?’

‘Dreadfully. She fell apart for a while. You may not believe me, but I tried to be a good friend in her hour of need. I got her to come and live with me so I could look after her.’

‘Or keep an eye on her?’ Alejandro suggested, still regarding the Englishman with open suspicion.

‘… When she realized she was pregnant, I convinced her to move back here instead. There was no shadow of suspicion over her, and no one else knew about her relationship with Leo. I knew she and the baby would be safe here …’

‘Leo wasn’t.’

Wagstaff swallowed. ‘… Leo made mistakes.’

Alejandro raised an eyebrow. ‘Such as?’

‘He disappeared, for one thing, which made the Americans jumpy. At the time, I just assumed he and Lise had broken things off after Valentin’s suicide and that he had fled. Into the wind. These were the days before credit-card trails and trackers and satellite navigation; it was much easier to go cold. Lise had come back here quite openly and legitimately, but he just dropped off the face of the earth.

‘None of us knew where he’d gone until he resurfaced at your mother’s christening with some story about working as an artist in the Netherlands. Poppycock, of course; it transpired he was hiding out not two miles down the road. I think their idea was to engineer a sort of public reunion between them, post-Paris, in which they would then fall in love, marry, and he would eventually adopt his own biological child. Lise was a widow; no one would have thought twice. I admired the ingenuity, honestly. It would have worked.’

‘But?’ Alejandro prodded.

Wagstaff sighed. He looked tired. ‘But I think Valentin’s death haunted him. Once he resurfaced here, we kept tabs on him – discovered he had started attending some anti-American protest groups. Small-scale stuff

which, on its own, might not have been too concerning. But coupled with a big error at your mother's christening, it suggested a direction of travel the CIA didn't like.'

'What error?' Dulcie asked.

'He started mouthing off about things he shouldn't have in front of the wrong people.'

'Like who?

'His real handler for one. The Americans don't like loose ends, especially when it concerns POTUS, and he wasn't doing anything to reassure them of his discretion.'

Dulcie leaned forward, needing to be sure she understood. 'So you're saying … *they* killed him? The CIA?'

Wagstaff sighed, then nodded.

'When? *How?*' she asked, breathless with shock.

'I don't know the details.'

'Oh, come o—!' Alejandro began.

Wagstaff held his hands up quickly. 'I mean it. I don't. All I can tell you is what I have guessed.'

'Which is …?' Dulcie blinked, waiting.

'He and Lise had made a rather public arrangement to meet again at the Bol d'Or a couple of weeks after the christening – I think it was all part of their courtship plan. I was surprised to run into my American opposite number on the day, and it was there that they told me the order had been given to deal with "the problem" … I tried talking them down. I was certain I could bring Santos in and keep him quiet; they owed me a favour, after all, and I wanted this for Lise. But it was already too late. They got to him before I could do anything. I never saw him again. No one did.'

Dulcie stared at the note on the coffee table, trying to imagine her grandfather's last day. His last moments. She could detect his panic in the scrawled handwriting, his fear in the blunted message. 'Well, he obviously got here to plant this note before they caught up with him. If he was a poor spy, he was also a brave one. He was trying to save Granny and their baby.'

'Yes. He must have put it there as some sort of prearranged signal between them, like the glasses in the wall.'

'But then, why didn't Granny look there? It makes no sense.'

'Because she didn't think he had run. She thought he had left her … Someone made her believe he had gone.'

‘But how?’ Dulcie frowned. ‘She knew how much he loved her. Who could have made her think that?’

‘Someone she trusted. Who also happened to be the person who killed him.’

‘Who was he?’

Wagstaff raised an eyebrow. ‘He?’

Dulcie blinked. ‘… It was a woman?’

There was a silence. ‘She was the perfect spy,’ he murmured. ‘Always everywhere at once. Efficient. Helpful. Kind.’

‘What was her name?’

He inhaled slowly. ‘It doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t have been her real name anyway. And besides, she died thirty years ago … A car crash. Drunk driver, supposedly, but who ever really knows?’ He stared at his hands. ‘… She was born American but raised here. The CIA planted her on the staff when they first had their suspicions about Valentin.’

Dulcie’s head whipped up. ‘Suspicions?’

‘Yes. He was guilty of the charges laid at his feet. He really was a mole, you see.’

Dulcie gasped.

‘He was passing classified material to the Soviets from the Donovan negotiations. Just mid-level stuff – exposing the American position so that Cuba could put its foot on the scales during negotiations and he got to line his pockets. But who was to say what he might have done when Russia’s presence in Cuba was revealed? When we were facing off nuclear war? No, I’m afraid Valentin’s fate was already sealed. He was a problem the CIA had to deal with sooner or later. His response to Santos’s leak simply solved that problem for them.’

He looked at her levelly. ‘*That’s* what I came to tell your grandmother. I wanted her to know her actions hadn’t killed an innocent man, but a guilty one. I knew it had tormented her all these years.’

Dulcie met his eyes, feeling utterly drained. ‘And yet, after all that, you still didn’t tell her.’

‘Didn’t I?’ A ghost of a smile curved his lips. ‘… I went back in when the nurse was asleep.’

She stared at him, the hairs rising on the nape of her neck as she remembered that fateful night when she had awoken with a start. She had

thought something – an instinct, a text – had roused her. But could it have been the simple click of a bedroom door opening?

‘I knew I wasn’t going to get another chance after that scene, so I chose my moment, took her hand and whispered it all in her ear. And do you know what she did?’

Dulcie shook her head.

‘She smiled.’

Dulcie remembered the look of beatific calm on her grandmother’s face as she had lain beside her … what must have been mere moments later?

‘It was as if she had been waiting to hear it before she could go … I wished I could have told her the truth sooner, but I couldn’t risk telling her until her final moments. If I wanted her to have peace, it also needed to die with her.’

‘And yet you’re telling us,’ Alejandro said.

‘You didn’t exactly leave me much choice. My honour was put into question.’ His eyebrow lifted with a tart look. ‘… Besides, look at me. When a man is about to meet his maker, abiding by the Official Secrets Act doesn’t seem quite so vital. A signed sheet of paper isn’t going to save his soul.’ He smiled, that supreme intellect still flickering within a failing body. ‘Moreover, I think you both know that if you tried repeating any of this to anyone, they would never believe you. The files will be sealed for another forty years, and everyone else who was involved is now dead. I’m the last man standing.’

Wagstaff casually reached into his jacket pocket and in a swift movement, took the note from the coffee table as he ran his other thumb over the wheel of a silver lighter. The paper went up in flames immediately and he tossed it into a decorative Hermès *vide-poche* on the coffee table between them.

Dulcie gasped at the sheer fluidity of the action, the old paper turning to ashes in moments.

‘Those glasses are now your only physical evidence of any of this, and I’m afraid they prove nothing. Sixty years of Swiss winters will have done their work. When it comes to the forensics, Leo Santos was never here. As far as the world knows, none of this ever happened. Only we three in this room know the truth.’

There was a long silence.

Dulcie felt as if she'd been beaten around the head. Her family's story was sealed in vaults, their secrets carried to graves …

'I'm sorry, dear. I know this is all a lot to take in,' Wagstaff said, his fingers interlaced as he sat back again and watched her from behind saddened eyes. 'But you did ask.'

Dulcie walked through the ballroom, empty now, her reflection rippling infinitely through mirrored walls. The air was still scented with perfume, white roses spilling from columned urns. In the denuded space she could see the stippling on the oak floor from generations' worth of high heels: each dimple the legacy of a waltz or a foxtrot, an echo of a moment of joy imprinted into the soul of the house.

Was her grandmother's spirit still here? She tried to imagine her moving through the rooms, dressed in finery, always the hostess with the most. People had envied her style and beauty, her inherited wealth and natural ease – but she had been no more than a doll in a house, trapped in a role of surface and appearance, because what lay underneath was not only painful but dangerous.

She had kept her secrets well. A child born from hidden love; a lover lost to a terrible fate. A single act of espionage that had played a part in – arguably – saving the world. There had been no indication of any of it as she had given Dulcie a home here, remaking them as a family of two. Like the rest of the world, Dulcie had taken her at face value: beautiful, maternal and frivolous.

She had lost even more than she had known.

Dulcie stood by the doors, looking out over the terrace where the statue of Diana was silhouetted against a darkening sky. Beyond lay the aged vineyard and the sweep of land down to the water. How often had her grandmother stood in this exact spot, looking for her lover's shadow through the vines? How long had she waited for him as his absence grew and she realized he wasn't coming back? Poisoned whispers, killing all hope—

'Dulcie.'

Alejandro was leaning in the doorway, watching her. He had taken Wagstaff back to his room upstairs to rest; she had persuaded him to stay here for a few more days, and she was going to ask Anna to come back tomorrow and manage his pain. It was what her grandmother would have

wanted. For all his many secrets and lies, in the end, he had been her truest friend.

‘Are you okay?’ He walked slowly through the room, his hands stuffed into his pockets. ‘That was … a lot.’

‘Yes, it was.’

‘How are you feeling?’

She thought for a moment. What was it she felt?

‘Sad. I can’t bear to think that Granny went through all of that, and that she went through it completely alone. She could never have confided in anyone; never have known if she and my mother were completely safe. And she thought the man she loved had abandoned her … It’s all just so cruel.’

‘It is. But at least she did have your mother, and she did have you. And you now know how incredible she was.’

‘Yeah.’ Even if it was a week late. ‘… Is Wags okay?’

‘Unsteady on his feet and very tired. I think it really took it out of him. More than he knew.’

‘It must have been hard on him too, keeping all those secrets …’ Last man standing. Like her. ‘I woke up this morning so determined to hate him.’ She gave a defeated laugh.

‘No one can hate Wags,’ he shrugged. ‘I tried playing bad cop back there, and look where it got me. Helping him up the stairs and bringing him a whisky.’

Dulcie smiled as she looked back out towards the inky lake. Lights were shining on the water like fallen stars. She rested her head against the window frame.

‘So what are you going to do now?’ he asked, watching her.

She inhaled sharply, as if the words had dug under her ribs and poked her. ‘Honestly, I don’t know. My life is in London, but my home is here. I’m scared that if I go back and pick up the reins there, this place will … crumble, somehow. And then even my memories will be gone. This is my only anchor now, my only link with my past and with who I am.’ She shrugged. ‘But then again, what do I really have here but bricks and mortar? Everyone who loved me has gone.’

‘Not everyone.’ Her heart skipped a beat at the comment; her eyes flashed up. ‘Helda and Georges are family to you. I’ve seen it in the way you all look after each other.’

She swallowed. It wasn't the answer she had suddenly hoped for, even though she knew he was right. 'Yes. I'm very lucky.'

A silence began to bloom, and she felt the question of 'them' begin to press forward. The last hour, day and week had been given over to other, more pressing matters, but now it was her own life she had to look to – and she owed him an apology, she knew that. She had all but sprinted from his bed, cutting him out the very moment after she'd let him in.

'Alé—'

'I'm heading back to Spain.'

'… What?' she asked, the word barely a breath.

'Flying back tomorrow and spending the holidays with my family. It's been too long since I went home, and … well, this has made me realize that whatever our differences, our time together isn't guaranteed. My parents are getting older, and I guess I need to forgive my father while I still can. He's not a bad man, just opinionated and narrow-minded. But I don't want to live with regrets.'

Not like her grandmother. Not like Wags.

'No …' Her chest felt compressed. Robbed of oxygen. 'Are you coming back?'

'I'm not sure. I need to take some time and figure out what I'm doing with my life.' He cracked one of his devastating smiles, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. 'I hoped the landlord would cut me some slack if I break my contract …?'

She tried to smile back. 'It would be hard for her not to … After the way she behaved.'

There was another pause.

'Dulcie …'

She looked up at him and saw again the look she had seen in his eyes in the music room. She had thought it was tenderness; something gentle where once there had only been spark. But it was regret.

'I'm sorry. I wish things could have been different for us … For a while there, I thought they might be.'

'Yeah,' she swallowed, hearing the finality in his words. 'Me too.'

'There were just too many—'

'I know …' She had lobbed grenades every time he tried to get close to her. It was easier to keep a distance than suffer another loss. 'It's fine, really. Definitely for the best.' She forced a smile. 'But the geese …?'

‘I know. I was worried about them too. They’re high-maintenance. Hate nearly everyone.’

‘That’s their job, I guess … I’ll sort something out.’

He winced. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, don’t worry about it.’

‘Okay.’

He was leaving – not just her, not just here; he was leaving everything behind. She tried to believe it, but she couldn’t risk feeling anything. ‘Do you want Helda to bring you a tray over?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m all packed. I’m going to stay in a hotel tonight. Leave you in peace once and for all.’

‘… Sure.’ She had so much peace now, she didn’t know what to do with it all. ‘So, then, I guess this is goodbye.’

‘I guess it is.’

She stepped forward and hugged him, her cheek pressed lightly to his chest. She closed her eyes and held her breath, refusing to catch his scent and remember how it had felt to lie in his embrace, skin to skin. She felt his hand splay over her back, his face tipped into her hair, and she pulled away again quickly.

‘Thank you for everything, helping me out with all of this.’ Her voice was thick but she held herself well. ‘You’ve been a friend to me, Alé. Better than I have been to you.’

‘That’s not true … The flat … but …’ He looked away; compliments didn’t make this any better. ‘*Adios*, Dulcie.’

He turned and crossed the room. His duffel bag was already packed and left by the door, and she watched as he picked it up and slipped out of her life as easily as he’d stepped in. A stranger. Gone again.

Into the wind.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lake Geneva
25 December 2026

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘What’s that?’ Helda asked, looking up from the steam cloud enveloping her as she braised the turkey with goose fat for the fifth time.

‘Another Signac’s coming up for sale, and it looks …’ Dulcie peered closer at the screen. ‘I swear it looks like a sister piece to the other one we got for the baroness … Same dimensions. Similar view, palette … Doesn’t that look matched to you, Wags?’

She brought up an image of the one she had bought at Christie’s last month and tabbed between the two.

‘Hmm,’ he said, peering thoughtfully over his glasses. ‘Certainly looks it. Would the baroness like the pair?’

‘We can ask, but I’m not sure her budget will stretch to it. Quinn said she’s been going all in on the dining room: de Gournay walls and a sixteen-seater table with Chippendale chairs.’

‘A sixteen-seater in a mews house?’ Wagstaff scoffed.

‘I know. God knows how we’re going to get it all in.’

‘Hmm,’ Helda said, weighing in with her disapproval too as she turned over the potatoes in the tray.

Last night they had had meat fondue in the Swiss tradition, the four of them sitting around the kitchen table afterwards and playing cards, but today was the main event. Cranberry sauce was simmering on the stove beside the Christmas pudding (Wags had donated his lucky sixpence that he kept ‘upon his person’ all year round in the event of an impromptu Christmas pudding offering); carrots, parsnips and sprouts were already

prepped and ready for their turns. Helda had perfected the British Christmas dinner the very first year Dulcie had come to live here, doing everything exactly the way Dulcie's mother had done it.

Above their heads, paper-chains Dulcie had made as a little girl – and which her grandmother had kept all these years – looped across the ceiling. Crackers sat across the plates; Wagstaff was very much hoping for a purple paper crown, which he said was his best colour.

Outside the windows, Georges kept staggering past as he played with the geese. In spite of her trepidation about bringing them over here, the bonding between the old chauffeur-slash-gardener and the flock had been immediate, and the birds loved following him across the lawns as he kept the paths clear and deadheaded the hydrangeas. 'Most people get a dog,' Helda had tutted the first day they had been released in the grounds. He had spent the days beforehand building a secure pen and painting the goosehouse in the same duck-egg blue as the villa's shutters.

'I'll forward the Signac to Quinn tomorrow and see what he thinks.'

'Tomorrow? Why not now?'

'It's Christmas Day, Helda. Even he takes Christmas Day off.'

'That man never rests,' the housekeeper scoffed. 'Your phone is always exploding.'

'Blowing up.' Dulcie smiled at the mistranslation.

It was true, though. They were getting busier. A few smaller projects had come through in the past few weeks that were keeping the cash flow moving, at least for the moment. Hugh Cecil had unfortunately gone to ground since Dulcie had turned down his proposal for 'meeting up halfway' in Bali over the new year. Even though Alejandro was no longer in the picture, she was resolute that there would be no more ambiguity or muddled lines between them going forward. She and Quinn had made a formal pitch based on the floor plans and photographs provided, but giving them the commission would mean Hugh got her eye, nothing more. If he didn't like that and chose to give the job to his old friend Tom Gifford, so be it. But she knew he had wanted the other Signac. Could getting this one for him be the sweetener she needed to transition to their purely professional footing?

The boot-room door slammed and Georges came through several moments later, ruddy-cheeked and in his socks, his wellies back in their rack.

'It's started snowing again,' he said.

‘You don’t say,’ Wagstaff quipped, eyes on the snowflakes already melting in his hair.

‘You went out without your coat again,’ Helda said in her warning tone.

Georges rolled his eyes.

‘You looked like you were having fun out there,’ Dulcie grinned.

‘Yes, well, their water had iced over. And then Agatha was being fussy, so I had to find her plastic ball that she’d rolled under the hut.’

He had named every one of the geese and kept a list of their markings, weights, feeding requirements and preferred ‘enrichment’ games. He had also reinforced the pen when it became clear a local fox had picked up on their new residence here; several times they had seen him trotting over the grass at dusk, coming in from the vineyard.

This time it was Dulcie and Helda who swapped amused looks.

‘Georges, bring in the decanter, will you?’ Helda asked. ‘It’s on the sideboard in the dining room. I think it’s time for some wine, don’t you?’

‘It’s certainly six o’clock somewhere,’ Wagstaff offered.

Just not here, Dulcie thought. And not in Valencia, either.

She immediately shook the thought from her mind, not allowing it to take root. There was no point in dwelling on something that had never really been anything more than an idea. A prospect. She and Alejandro had breathed air into it for a few short hours and watched the world colour up. But then it had faded again, falling back before it could hold a shape.

And yet she missed him. She missed what they hadn’t been and hadn’t become. She felt the loss of him in this city, a hole torn in the atmosphere here that only he could fill. She hated that he wasn’t around any corner she might turn. That the forgotten little stable in a field behind a chapel now lay in bleak abandonment. When she had gone to collect the geese, she had peered through the windows and seen that his sculptures and tools had all been removed. Snow was falling through the open rafters and settling a foot deep on the stone floor, the blue tarp long since blown off.

She thought of her grandfather hunkered down there all those years ago, waiting for the day he could publicly claim his family; her grandmother up here, waiting for word. But their waiting had been in vain, and so was hers. Alejandro had gone, and the sooner she accepted that, the better.

She couldn’t accept it.

She had googled him one night when she couldn’t sleep, a temptation she hadn’t been able to resist. Old pictures had come up of him at parties, more

often than not with a beautiful woman by his side, and she'd felt sharp stabs of jealousy; but there had been some with his brothers and father too. It transpired his family was 'notable' in Spain, his father a prominent venture capitalist in the tech and biomedical industries, and she understood at once the friction between them. A man made rich by science might have limited understanding of, or tolerance for, a successful career in the arts. But they were going to try, at least. Alejandro had gone home to live without regrets, leaving her with plenty here.

Georges came through with the wine, and Dulcie looked up at them both as Helda set out the glasses and he poured.

'So I've been thinking …' she began, 'about the future.'

Immediately she saw tension flit over their faces. Her grandmother had left them a princely lump sum, the Mercedes and all her copper saucepans. They would never want for anything.

'I really want you to stay living here. With me … If you'd like to.'

Helda's face immediately crumpled, but she managed to stop short of crying. She was a stoic. She didn't believe in gratuitous tears. 'You do?'

'Of course! You're my family. And this is our home.'

Georges swelled up with emotion. 'Well … I'll drink to that,' he said in a thick voice as she stood to pick up her glass. But there was a pause as they stood at the counter, and in the next moment she was enfolded in their arms.

'You're the granddaughter we never had,' he rasped proudly.

Helda began to cry.

Dulcie wiped her tears away too as she gave a laugh. 'Don't. Don't set me off. Once I start, I can't seem to stop.'

'You're right,' Helda said briskly, wiping hers away and smoothing her thumbs over Dulcie's cheeks. 'There have been too many tears lately.'

Wagstaff was looking on with a sad smile, and Dulcie went over and reached for his hand. 'That includes you too, Wags. I'd like you to stay here too, if you'd be happy with that? You belong with us now.'

She wasn't the only one left alone in this world. He had never married, of course, nor had children, and she refused to let him wander into a bachelor's wilderness with no one to care for him in his final days. He was very far from perfect, but who was ever really close to it? He had acted for the greater good and made hard decisions in a time of crisis. He had done the best he could for her grandparents, even if he had ultimately fallen short.

The old man closed his eyes for several long moments at her words and when he opened them again, his lashes were wet. He nodded his head in reply. Some days the pain was better than others; today was one of the good days. Anna was with her family but would be back again this evening.

Georges held up his glass in a toast as everyone composed themselves. 'To family. And to home.'

'To family and to home.'

They drank deep gulps, feeling the high emotions settle. They all felt safe again now their mutual future here had been agreed.

'So what about London?' Helda asked, going back to stirring the gravy as Dulcie leaned against the table.

'I'll keep Dad's old flat in Pimlico; I don't want to sell it. But as for the business, I think Quinn and I might do rather well in split cities. We drive each other a little mad in a confined space, and the distance of this past month has been quite illuminating. I think we've actually worked better apart. And there's no doubt there would be plenty of prospective clients here.'

'No doubt about that,' Wagstaff agreed.

'But as my first project here, I want to do this place. It's tired and needs a redo. I hadn't noticed before, but repainting the drawing room after my little flooding incident made me realize how much it needs some TLC. I'll keep all the furniture and art and so on – they're the things that make it home – but some fresh walls, perhaps some new bathrooms …' Most of her inheritance was in trusts, but her grandmother had always said there would be a 'very reasonable' lump sum coming her way. 'I can use Villa Mirelle to showcase what we offer.'

'I think that sounds like a very good pla—' Helda stopped talking as the geese suddenly started up outside.

'The fox,' Dulcie said, peering out through the kitchen window onto the side lawn, but it was difficult to see. Dusk was falling fast.

'I'd better get them in,' Georges said worriedly, setting down his wine. 'I thought we had a little more time.'

'I'll help you.'

'Georges, put a coat on this time, please!' Helda called after him. 'I am not nursing you through hypothermia when I've spent all day cooking a turkey … You too, Dulcie.'

But Dulcie was already running out the back door. She was young and had the constitution of—

‘Oh!’ She stopped in her tracks on the snowy lawn. The flock weren’t huddled in fear from the fox, but rather at the feet of someone stooped over, petting them.

Alejandro looked up, his duffel bag slung as ever over one shoulder, snowflakes in his hair. He straightened up. ‘… Hey.’

She felt the breath catch in her chest at the sight of him ankle-deep in snow on the lawn. ‘You’ve come back.’ It was a silly thing to say. Of course he had come back! He was right there!

But it was hard for her heart to trust what her eyes were showing her. She had really thought that he had gone for good.

‘Is everything okay with your family? Did something happen?’

‘Nothing bad. I did what I went back to do. It was good.’ He shrugged. ‘We talked things out.’

‘Oh,’ she nodded. ‘I’m happy for you.’

‘Yeah.’ He bit his lip, watching her, seeing how she had rooted to the spot, holding herself unnaturally still, like an injured bird. ‘The thing is, though …’

She could only blink, feeling the frantic squeeze and pump of her heart as she braced, not daring to believe anything good could be coming from this visit. She had spent every hour since he’d left reconciling herself to the wisdom of his choice – she was brittle, guarded, inured to loss. There were far easier women to return to.

‘The thing is I can’t … I don’t want, to not be *here*—’

Just then, Georges’s shadow filled the cone of light thrown out from the kitchen. Alejandro’s eyes rose up towards him, but before he could raise a hand or even say a word, the silhouette was gone again and the door hastily closed.

Dulcie could only imagine the commotion going on inside.

He looked back at her, hesitating at her ongoing silence. Doubt crossed his face like a spasm of pain. ‘I probably should have called first. This is getting to be a habit, me turning up uninvited—’

‘No, it’s …’ The words stoppered in her throat. Was this really real? She was trying to push past her disbelief. She had always felt herself easy to leave. No one had ever come back for her before.

Dusk enfolded them in its velvet embrace, the lights of an aeroplane flashing in the sky. The geese began pecking and exploring again, dispersing from their clutch around his feet and he walked over, stopping in front of her. ‘I knew, even at the airport, that I was making a mistake leaving here. I should have stayed and told you how I really felt … I should have fought for you—’

But she shook her head, stopping him with a look. ‘No fighting required.’ Her hand found his, her body saying what her voice could not.

For a moment he looked confused, as if it couldn’t be as simple as that; but if she had learnt anything, it was that love was hard to find, but even harder to hold on to.

‘I missed you,’ he murmured.

‘I missed you more.’

She saw the way his breath caught at the simple statement. No games. No more barriers standing between them. ‘Not possible. You haven’t left my mind once since I left.’

‘Well, you did have a lot to dwell on after the funeral.’ She tried not to shiver as he ran a hand lightly down her arm. ‘You were right to run a mile. Most people would.’

He shook his head. ‘That wasn’t why I went.’

‘No?’

He frowned. ‘Is that what you thought?’

She shrugged.

‘I didn’t leave because of that. I just thought you had too many other things to deal with. I thought the timing was wrong.’ He looked at her through thick lashes. ‘I *like* that I know everything about you.’

She tipped her head to the side, holding his gaze, feeling herself pulled into it. Falling … ‘Well, not quite everything,’ she managed.

‘*No?*’ He gave a low laugh at her tease, his fingers grasping her wrists and pulling her closer. ‘What more could there possibly be?’

She watched as he sank into the cocky grin that had captured her in their very first moment of meeting and was now the precursor to a kiss that she knew was going to make everything right in her world. At long last.

He leaned in. ‘Tell me.’

She smiled at his insistence – his need – to know every last thing, her lips curling against his as she held on to her secret for a few moments more.

‘I take my coffee with milk,’ she whispered. ‘One sugar.’

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

This was a highly satisfying book to put together, following months of research into the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, but it was also something of a puzzle, coming in on the Swiss perspective as it pertained to French politics of the day. If you've read any of my other books, you'll know I love to read around a topic as much as I possibly can before I start writing, and, of course, when writing about a historic event, it's important to be accurate. You will recognize some iconic real-life figures in the book, and their inclusion isn't accidental or gratuitous – they're based on true events too. However, in some instances the dates are slightly different to my timeline, and if artistic licence allows me to be flexible in that regard, I nonetheless feel duty-bound to report the actual facts here: the Alberto Giacometti exhibition in Paris (following his Venice Biennale win) was in 1963, the summer after my scene. Audrey Hepburn did in fact host a fundraiser ball with the IRCR but several years earlier in 1959, after they helped her look for her father after the war; Pablo Picasso was indeed in talks with the Franco government for a retrospective, but again earlier in 1956. And after Rudolf Nureyev's defection from the Kirov Ballet tour in Paris in May 1961, he did return to dance with Margot Fonteyn but not in 1962. The ferocious weather in the prologue is based on accounts of the famous storm which afflicted the Bol d'Or in June 2019 when 100km-per-hour winds tore along the lake, capsizing boats, destroying masts and sails, and seeing less than half the competitors finish the race. Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, the memo pertaining to JFK is real but was never made public at the time, and was only declassified recently. Its existence enabled an exciting 'What if?' that became the backbone of this story.

It is only thanks to the clarity and perceptiveness of my editor, Sally Williamson, that I was able to demuddle the plot and give you a book that is now (hopefully) easy and thrilling to read! My thanks also to my brilliant

agent, Amanda Preston, who can immediately discern what is good and what is atrocious in every draft, all whilst reading faster than any human on the planet.

Thank you also to the outstanding team at Transworld for consistently overdelivering in every sphere: editing, art, promotion, marketing, sales, international … I'm in awe of each and every one of you.

Finally, always, thanks and love to my family and friends who endure my exhaustion and tolerate my frequent hibernations. I'm incredibly lucky to have you in my life.

OceanofPDF.com

Escape to Italy with Karen Swan in her sweeping and emotional page-turner …



Three Summers

1957: The summer of innocence
Amongst the lemon trees, Rafaella Parisi impatiently waits for the summer visitors to arrive in her small fishing village on the coast of Puglia. She may be dating Fon Giannelli, but there is one person she longs to see: Cosimo – son of the wealthy Franchetti family.

1958: The summer everything changes
After a devastating accident at the lavish Franchetti villa, Rafa makes a vow that changes the course of all their futures …

1961: The summer they meet again
When Rafa and Cosi's worlds collide, Rafa faces an agonizing choice. Is she willing to risk the life she has for the future she once dreamed of?

Available now!

OceanofPDF.com

Enjoyed *The Winter Guest*? Then don't miss Karen Swan's unforgettable brand-new novel …

The Yellow House

Greece 1976: On a tiny island fringed by turquoise seas, Carly waits in a sun-drenched yellow villa, counting down the days until her most precious possession is returned to her. Hidden within it lies the truth about the tragedy that shattered her life a year before – a truth she has spent months trying to hide from.

In Amsterdam, Tess is searching for her missing sister – her only clue a faded postcard. Running out of time and money, she accepts an unexpected offer: deliver a small antique pot to a remote Greek island in exchange for staying in Amsterdam all summer. But as Tess journeys south through Europe, she finds herself drawn to an irresistible stranger – and to a future she never imagined.

As she arrives at the yellow house, Tess realizes that the end of her journey is really only the beginning …

Available February 2027!

OceanofPDF.com

Great stories.
Unforgettable characters.
Unbeatable deals.

WELCOME TO PAGE TURNERS.
A PLACE FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO READ.

In bed, in the bath, on your lunch break. Wherever you are, you love to lose yourself in a brilliant story.

And because we know how that feels, we choose books you'll love, and send you ebooks at an amazingly low price.

From tear-jerkers to love stories, family dramas and gripping thrillers, we're here to help you find your next must-read.

Don't miss our book-inspired prizes and sneak peeks into the most exciting new releases.

Sign up to our FREE newsletter at
penguin.co.uk/newsletters/page-turners

SPREAD THE BOOK LOVE AT

OceanofPDF.com



THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Find us online and join the conversation

TWITTER / X
twitter.com/penguinukbooks

FACEBOOK
facebook.com/penguinbooks

INSTAGRAM
instagram.com/penguinukbooks

YOUTUBE
youtube.com/penguinbooks

PINTEREST
pinterest.com/penguinukbooks

LINKEDIN
linkedin.com/company/penguin-random-house-uk

TIKTOK
tiktok.com/@penguinukbooks

For the latest books, recommendations, author interviews and more

Sign up to the Penguin Newsletter

Find out more about the author and discover
your next read at **Penguin.co.uk**

OceanofPDF.com

TRANSWORLD

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
New Zealand | India | South Africa

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk



First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Penguin Books
Simultaneous Bantam edition published 2026

Copyright © Karen Swan, 2026

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Cover design and illustration by Katie Tooke
Cover art direction by Beci Kelly/TW

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

ISBN: 978-1-529-95216-2

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

All correspondence to:
Transworld

Penguin Random House
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

OceanofPDF.com