

*The
Light Behind
the Window*

LUCINDA RILEY

PAN BOOKS

‘What you are, you are by accident of birth;
what I am, I am by myself.’

Ludwig Van Beethoven

The Light Behind the Window

*Unbroken night;
Darkness is the world I know.
Heavy burden;
No lights behind the window glow.*

*Softer day;
A hand reached out amidst the gloom.
Touching gently;
Spreading warmth across the room.*

*Twilight hours;
Shadows ebb and flow from you.
Secret longing;
Heart grows tender, beats anew.*

*Unbroken light;
Darkness was the world I knew
Burning brightly;
Glowing with my love for you.*

*Sophia de la Martinières,
July 1943*

*Gassin, South of France,
Spring 1998*

Emilie felt the pressure on her hand relax and looked down at her mother. As she watched, it seemed that, whilst Valérie's soul departed her body, the pain which had contorted her features was disappearing too, enabling Emilie to look past the emaciated face and remember the beauty her mother had once possessed.

'She has left us,' murmured Phillippe, the doctor, pointlessly.
'Yes.'

Behind her, she heard the doctor muttering a prayer, but had no thought to join him in it. Instead, she stared down in morbid wonder at the sack of slowly greying flesh which was all that remained of the presence that had dominated her life for thirty years. Emilie instinctively wanted to prod her mother awake, because the transition from life to death – given the force of nature Valérie de la Martinières had been – was too much for her senses to accept.

She wasn't sure how she should feel. After all, she had

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played this moment over in her head on many occasions in the past few weeks. Emilie turned away from her dead mother's face and gazed out of the window at the wisps of cloud suspended like uncooked meringues in the blue sky. Through the open window, she could hear the faint cry of a lark come to herald the spring.

Rising slowly, her legs stiff from the long night-time hours she had been sitting vigil, she walked over to the window. The early-morning vista had none of the heaviness that the passing of the hours would eventually bring. Nature had painted a fresh picture as it did every dawn, the soft Provençal palette of umber, green and azure gently ushering in the new day. Emilie gazed across the terrace and the formal gardens to the undulating vineyards that surrounded the house and spread across the earth for as far as her eye could see. The view was simply magnificent and had remained unchanged for centuries. Château de la Martinières had been her sanctuary as a child, a place of peace and safety; its tranquillity was indelibly printed into every synapse of her brain.

And now it was hers – though whether her mother had left anything behind from her financial excesses to continue to fund its upkeep, Emilie did not know.

'Mademoiselle Emilie, I'll leave you alone so you may say goodbye.' The doctor's voice broke into her thoughts. 'I'll take myself downstairs to fill out the necessary form. I am so very sorry,' he added as he gave her a small bow and left the room.

Am I sorry . . . ?

The question flashed unbidden through Emilie's mind. She walked back to the chair and sat down once more, trying to find answers to the many questions her mother's death posed, wanting a resolution, to add and subtract the conflicting

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emotional columns to produce a definitive feeling. This was, of course, impossible. The woman who lay so pathetically still – so harmless to her now, yet such a confusing influence whilst she had lived – would always bring the discomfort of complexity.

Valérie had given her daughter life, she had fed and clothed her and provided a substantial roof over Emilie's head. She had never beaten or abused her.

She simply had not noticed her.

Valérie had been – Emilie searched for the word – *disinterested*. Which had rendered her, as her daughter, invisible.

Emilie reached out her hand and put it on top of her mother's.

'You didn't see me, Maman . . . you didn't see . . .'

Emilie was painfully aware that her birth had been a reluctant nod to the need to produce an heir for the de la Martinières line; a requirement contrived out of duty, not maternal desire for a child. And faced with an 'heiress' rather than the requisite male, Valérie had been further disinterested. Too old to conceive again – Emilie had been born in the very last flush of her mother's fertility at forty-three – Valérie had continued her life as one of Paris's most charming, generous and beautiful hostesses. Emilie's birth and subsequent presence had seemed to hold as much importance for her as the acquisition of a further chihuahua to add to the three she already owned. Like the dogs, Emilie was produced from the nursery and petted in company when it suited Maman to do so. At least the dogs had the comfort of each other, Emilie mused, whereas she had spent vast tracts of her childhood alone.

Nor had it helped that she'd inherited the de la Martinières features rather than the delicate, petite blondness of her

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mother's Slavic ancestors. She had been a stocky child, her olive skin and thick mahogany hair – trimmed every six weeks into a bob, the fringe forming a heavy line above her dark eyebrows – a genetic gift from her father, Édouard.

'I look at you sometimes, my dear, and can hardly believe you are the child I gave birth to!' her mother would comment on one of her rare visits to the nursery on her way out to the opera. 'But at least you have my eyes.'

Emilie wished sometimes she could tear the deep-blue orbs out of their sockets and replace them with her father's beautiful hazel eyes. She didn't think they fitted in her face and, besides, every time she looked through them into the mirror, she saw her mother.

It had often seemed to Emilie that she had been born without any gift her mother might value. Taken to ballet lessons at the age of three, Emilie found that her body refused to contort itself into the required positions. As the other little girls fluttered around the studio like butterflies, she struggled to find physical grace. Her small, wide feet enjoyed being planted firmly on the earth and any attempt to separate them from it resulted in failure. Piano lessons had been equally unsuccessful and as for singing, she was tone deaf.

Neither did her body accommodate well the feminine dresses her mother insisted she wore if a *soirée* was taking place in the exquisite, rose-filled garden at the back of the Paris house – the setting for Valérie's famous parties. Tucked away on a seat in the corner, Emilie would marvel at the elegant, charming and beautiful woman floating between her guests with such gracious professionalism. During the many social occasions at the Paris house and then in the summer at the *château* in Gassin, Emilie would feel tongue-tied and

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uncomfortable. On top of everything else, it seemed she had not inherited her mother's social ease.

And yet, to the outsider, it would have seemed she'd had everything. A fairy-tale childhood – living in a beautiful house in Paris, her family from a long line of French nobility stretching back centuries *and* with the inherited wealth still intact after the war years – it was a scenario that many other young French girls could only dream of.

At least she'd had her beloved Papa. Although no more attentive to her than Maman, due to his obsession with his ever-growing collection of rare books which he kept at the château, when Emilie did manage to catch his attention he gave her the love and affection she craved.

Papa had been sixty when she was born and died when she was fourteen. Time spent together had been rare, but Emilie had understood that much of her personality was derived from him. Édouard was quiet and thoughtful, preferring his books and the peace of the château to the constant flow of acquaintances Maman brought into their homes. Emilie had often pondered just how two such polar opposites had fallen in love in the first place. Yet Édouard seemed to adore his younger wife, made no complaint at her lavish lifestyle, even though he lived more frugally himself, and was proud of her beauty and popularity on the Paris social scene.

Often, when summer had come to an end and it was time for Valérie and Emilie to return to Paris, Emilie would beg her father to let her stay.

'Papa, I love it here in the countryside with you. There is a school in the village . . . I could go there and look after you, because you must be so lonely here at the château by yourself.'

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Édouard would chuck her chin affectionately, but shake his head. ‘No, little one. As much as I love you, you must return to Paris to learn both your lessons and how to become a lady like your mother.’

‘But, Papa, I don’t want to go back with Maman, I want to stay here, with you . . .’

And then, when she was thirteen . . . Emilie blinked away sudden tears, still unable to return to the moment when her mother’s disinterest had turned to neglect. She would suffer the consequences of it for the rest of her life.

‘How *could* you not see or care what was happening to me, Maman? I was your daughter!’

A sudden flicker of one of Valérie’s eyes caused Emilie to jump in fear that, in fact, Maman was still alive after all and had heard the words she had just spoken. Trained to know the signs, Emilie checked Valérie’s wrist for a pulse and found none. It was, of course, the last physical vestige of life as her muscles relaxed into death.

‘Maman, I will try to forgive you. I will try to understand, but just now I cannot say whether I’m happy or sad that you are dead.’ Emilie could feel her own breathing stiffening, a defence mechanism against the pain of speaking the words out loud. ‘I loved you so much, tried so hard to please you, to gain your love and attention, to feel . . . *worthy* as your daughter. My God! I did everything!’ Emilie balled her hands into fists. ‘You were my *mother*!’

The sound of her own voice echoing across the vast bedroom shocked her into silence. She stared at the de la Martinières family crest, painted two hundred and fifty years ago onto the majestic headboard. Fading now, the two wild boars locked in combat with the ubiquitous fleur-de-lis and

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the motto, 'Victory Is All', emblazoned below, were barely legible.

She shivered suddenly, although the room was warm. The silence in the château was deafening. A house once filled with life was now an empty husk, housing only the past. She glanced down at the signet ring on the smallest finger of her right hand, depicting the family crest in miniature. She was the last surviving de la Martinières.

Emilie felt the sudden weight of centuries of ancestors upon her shoulders, and the sadness of a great and noble lineage reduced to one unmarried and childless thirty-year-old woman. The family had borne the ravages of hundreds of years of brutality but, in the space of fifty years, the First and Second World Wars had seen only her father survive.

At least there would be none of the usual scrapping over the inheritance. Due to an outdated Napoleonic law, all brothers and sisters directly inherited their parents' property equally. Many was the family who had been brought to near ruin by one child who refused to agree to sell. Sadly, in this case, *les héritiers en ligne directe* amounted simply to her.

Emilie sighed. Sell she might have to, but those were thoughts for another day. Now it was time to say goodbye.

'Rest in peace, Maman.' She placed a light kiss on top of the greying forehead then crossed herself. Rising wearily from the chair, Emilie left the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

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Two Weeks Later

Emilie took her café au lait and croissant out through the kitchen door and into the lavender-filled courtyard at the back of the house. The château faced due south, so this spot was the best place to catch the morning sun. It was a beautiful, balmy spring day, mild enough to be outside in a T-shirt.

On the afternoon of her mother's funeral in Paris, forty-eight hours ago, the rain had fallen relentlessly as Valérie was interred. At the wake afterwards – held at the Ritz as per Valérie's request – Emilie had accepted condolences from the great and the good. The women, mostly of a similar age to her mother, were all in black and had reminded Emilie of a coven of elderly crows. A variety of ancient hats disguised their thinning hair as they'd tottered around sipping champagne, bodies emaciated by age, make-up plastered mask-like to their sagging skin.

In their heyday, they had been regarded as the most beautiful and powerful women in Paris. Yet the circle of life had moved them on and they'd been replaced by a whole new raft of young movers and shakers. Each one of the women

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was simply waiting to die, Emilie had thought, feeling maudlin as she'd left the Ritz and hailed a taxi to take her home to her apartment. Utterly miserable, she had drunk far more wine than usual and woken the next morning with a hang-over.

But at least the worst was over, Emilie comforted herself, as she took a sip of her coffee. In the past two weeks, there'd been little time to concentrate on anything other than the funeral arrangements. She'd known that at least she owed her mother the kind of send-off that Valérie herself would have organised perfectly. Emilie had found herself agonising over whether to provide cupcakes or petits fours with the coffee, and if the creamy, overblown roses her mother had so loved were dramatic enough for the table decorations. These were the kind of subtle decisions Valérie had taken every week and Emilie had a new-found grudging respect for the ease with which she'd handled it.

And now – Emilie turned her face up towards the sun and basked in its comforting warmth – she must think about the future.

Gerard Flavier, the family *notaire*, who looked after the de la Martinières's legal and property affairs, was on his way from Paris to meet her here at the château. Until he divulged where the estate stood financially, there wasn't much point in making plans. Emilie had taken a month's leave from work to deal with what she knew would be a complex and time-consuming process. She wished she had siblings to share the burden with; legalities and finances were not her strong point. The responsibility terrified her.

Emilie felt the softness of fur against her bare ankle, glanced down and saw Frou-Frou, her mother's last remaining

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chihuahua, gazing up at her mournfully. She picked up the elderly dog and sat her on her knee, stroking her ears.

‘It seems there is only you and me left, Frou,’ she murmured. ‘So we’ll have to look after each other, won’t we?’

The earnest expression in Frou-Frou’s half-blind eyes made Emilie smile. She had no idea how she was to care for the dog in the future. Even though she dreamed of one day surrounding herself with animals, her tiny apartment in the Marais Quarter and the long hours she worked were not conducive to looking after a dog who had been brought up in the emotional and physical lap of luxury.

Yet animals and the care of them were her day job. Emilie lived for her vulnerable clients, none of whom could express to her how they felt or where it hurt.

‘It is sad that my daughter seems to prefer the company of animals to human beings . . .’

The words epitomised Valérie’s feelings towards the way Emilie lived her life. When she had originally announced she wished to go to university and take a degree in veterinary science, Valérie had shaped her lips into a moue of distaste. ‘I cannot understand why you would wish to spend your life cutting open poor little animals and gazing at their insides.’

‘Maman, that’s the process, not the reason. I love animals, I want to help them,’ she had answered defensively.

‘If you must have a career, then why not think about fashion? I have a friend at *Marie Claire* magazine who I’m sure could find you a little job. Of course, when you marry, you will not wish to continue working. You will become a wife and that will be your life.’

Although Emilie did not blame Valérie for being stuck in her time warp, she couldn’t help wishing her mother had taken

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some pride in her daughter's achievements. She'd come out of university top of her year and been taken on immediately as a trainee vet by a well-known Paris practice.

'Maybe Maman was right, Frou,' she said with a sigh, 'maybe I do prefer animals to people.'

Emilie heard the crunch of gravel under tyres, put Frou-Frou on the ground and walked round to the front of the house to greet Gerard.

'Emilie, how are you?' Gerard Flavier kissed her on both cheeks.

'I'm all right, thank you,' Emilie replied. 'How was your journey?'

'I took a plane to Nice and then hired a car to bring me down here,' Gerard said as he walked past her through the front door and stood in the vast hall, the closed shutters shrouding it in shadow. 'I was happy to escape from Paris and visit one of my favourite places in France. Spring in the Var is always exquisite.'

'I thought it was better we meet here at the château,' agreed Emilie. 'My parents' papers are in the desk in the library and I presumed you would need access to them.'

'Yes.' Gerard walked across the worn marble-tiled floor and surveyed a damp patch on the ceiling above them. 'The château is in need of some tender loving care, is it not?' He sighed. 'It's ageing, like us all.'

'Shall we go through to the kitchen?' Emilie suggested. 'I have some coffee ready.'

'That's just what I need,' said Gerard with a smile as he followed her along the corridor which led to the back of the house.

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‘Please, sit down,’ she said, indicating a chair at the long oak table and walking over to the range to reboil some water.

‘There aren’t many luxuries in here, are there?’ said Gerard, studying the sparsely furnished, utilitarian space.

‘No,’ agreed Emilie. ‘But then, this was only used by the servants to provide food for our family and their guests. I’d doubt my mother ever put her hands in the sink.’

‘Who takes care of the château and its domestic needs now?’ asked Gerard.

‘Margaux Duvall, the housekeeper, who’s been here for over fifteen years. She comes in from the village every afternoon. Maman dismissed the other staff after my father died and she stopped coming down to the house regularly each summer. I think she preferred to holiday on the yacht she rented.’

‘Your mother certainly liked to spend money,’ said Gerard as Emilie put a cup of coffee down in front of him. ‘On the things that mattered to her,’ he added.

‘Which was not this château,’ Emilie stated bluntly.

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘From what I’ve seen of her finances so far, it seemed she preferred the delights of the house of Chanel.’

‘Maman was fond of her haute couture, I know.’ Emilie sat down opposite him with her coffee. ‘Even last year when she was so ill, she still attended the fashion shows.’

‘Valérie was indeed quite a character – and famous too. Her passing engendered many column inches in our newspapers,’ he said. ‘Although it’s hardly surprising. The de la Martinières are one of the most noted families in France.’

‘I know,’ Emilie grimaced, ‘I saw the newspapers as well. Apparently I’m to inherit a fortune.’

‘It’s true that your family were once fabulously rich.

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Unfortunately, Emilie, times have moved on. The noble name of your family still exists, but the fortune does not.'

'I thought as much.' Emilie was unsurprised.

'You may have been aware that your papa was not a businessman,' Gerard continued. 'He was an intellectual, an academic who had little interest in money. Even though many times I talked to him of investments, tried to persuade him to plan a little for the future, he was uninterested. Twenty years ago, it hardly mattered – there was plenty. But between your father's lack of attention and your mother's penchant for the finer things in life, the fortune has diminished substantially.' Gerard sighed. 'I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings.'

'I was very much expecting this and it doesn't matter to me,' Emilie confirmed. 'I simply wish to organise what I need to and return to my work in Paris.'

'I'm afraid, Emilie, that the situation is not as straightforward as that. As I said at the start, I've not yet had time to peruse the details, but what I can tell you is that the estate has creditors, many of them. And these creditors must be paid as soon as possible,' he explained. 'Your mother managed to accrue an overdraft of almost twenty million francs against the Paris house. She had many other debts too, which will need to be paid off.'

'Twenty million francs?' Emilie was horrified. 'How could this have happened?'

'Easily. As the funds ran out, Valérie did not temper her lifestyle accordingly. She has been living on borrowed money for many, many years now. Please, Emilie –' Gerard saw the expression in her eyes – 'do not panic. These are debts that can easily be paid, not only with the sale of the Paris house itself, which I believe should raise around seventy million

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francs, but also its contents. For example, your mother's magnificent collection of jewellery, which is held in a vault at her bank, and the many paintings and valuable objets d'art in the house. You are by no means poor, Emilie, believe me, but action must be taken swiftly to stop the rot and decisions for the future made.'

'I see,' Emilie answered slowly. 'Forgive me, Gerard. I take after my father and have little interest or experience in managing finances.'

'I understand completely. Your parents have left you with a heavy burden that rests purely on your shoulders. Although –' Gerard raised his eyebrows – 'it's amazing how many relatives you suddenly seem to have acquired.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, you mustn't worry, it's usual for the vultures to descend at this time. I've had over twenty letters so far, from those who claim they are related in some way to the de la Martinières. Four hitherto unknown illegitimate brothers and sisters, apparently sired by your father out of wedlock, two cousins, an uncle and a member of staff from your parents' Paris household in the Sixties, who swears she was promised by your mother to be the recipient of a Picasso on her death.' Gerard smiled. 'It's all to be expected but, unfortunately, every claim must be investigated under French law.'

'You don't think any of them are valid?' Emilie's eyes were wide.

'I highly doubt it. And if it's any comfort to you, this has happened with every well-publicised death I have ever dealt with.' He shrugged. 'Leave it to me, and don't worry. I would prefer you, Emilie, to concentrate your thoughts on what you wish to do with the château. As I said, your mother's debts

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can easily be paid off with the sale of the Paris house and its contents. But that still leaves you with this magnificent property, which, from what I've seen so far, is in a bad state of repair. Whatever you decide, you will still be a wealthy woman, but do you want to sell this château or not?"

Emilie stared into the distance and sighed heavily. "To be honest, Gerard, I wish the whole thing would go away. That someone else could make the decision. And what about the vineyards here? Is the *cave* producing any profit?" she asked.

"Again, that's something I must investigate for you," said Gerard. "If you decide to sell the château, the wine business can be included as a going concern."

"Sell the château . . ." Emilie repeated Gerard's words. Hearing them spoken out loud underlined the enormity of the responsibilities she had to face. "This house has been in our family for two hundred and fifty years. And now it's down to me to make the decision. And the truth is," she sighed, "I have no idea what to do for the best."

"I'm sure you don't. As I said earlier, it's difficult that you are all alone." Gerard shook his head in sympathy. "What can I say? We cannot always choose the situation we find ourselves in. I'll try to help you as much as I can, Emilie, I know it's what your father would have wanted from me under these circumstances. Now, I'll go and freshen up, and then maybe later we should take a walk down to the vineyard and speak to the manager there?"

"OK," Emilie replied wearily. "I've opened the shutters in the bedroom to the left of the main staircase. It has one of the best views in the house. Would you like me to show you?"

"No, thank you. I've stayed here many times before, as you know. I can find my own way."

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Gerard rose, nodded at Emilie and walked out of the kitchen to climb the main staircase to his bedroom. He paused halfway up, staring at the dusty, faded face of a de la Martinières ancestor. So many of the noble French families, and the history attached to them, were dying out, leaving a barely visible line in the sand to mark their passing. He wondered how the great Giles de la Martinières in the portrait – warrior, nobleman and, some said, lover of Marie Antoinette – would feel if he could see the future of his lineage resting on the slight shoulders of one young woman. And a woman who had always struck Gerard as odd.

During his many visits to the de la Martinières households in the past, Gerard had beheld a plain child, whose self-containment did not allow her to respond to affection from him or others. A child who seemed removed, distant, almost surly in her reticence to his friendly approaches. As a *notaire*, Gerard felt his work not only encompassed the technical process of working on columns of figures, but also the ability to read the emotions of his clients.

Emilie de la Martinières was an enigma.

He had watched her at her mother's funeral and her face had betrayed nothing. Granted, she had become far more attractive in adulthood than she had been as a child. Yet even now, downstairs, faced with the loss of her one remaining parent and the responsibility of terrible decisions, Gerard had not found her vulnerable. The existence she led in Paris could not be further removed from that of her ancestors. She lived an unremarkable life. And yet, everything about her parents and the history of her family *was* remarkable.

Gerard continued up the stairs, irritated by her muted responses. There was something missing . . . something

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about her that was unreachable. And he had no idea how to find it.

As Emilie stood up and put the coffee cups in the sink, the kitchen door opened and Margaux, the château housekeeper, stepped through the door. Her face lit up as she saw Emilie.

‘Mademoiselle Emilie!’ Margaux moved to embrace her. ‘I didn’t know you were coming! You should have told me. I would have prepared everything for you.’

‘I arrived from Paris late last night,’ explained Emilie. ‘It’s good to see you, Margaux.’

Margaux drew back and studied Emilie, sympathy in her eyes. ‘How are you?’

‘I am . . . coping,’ Emilie answered honestly, the sight of Margaux, who had cared for her when she was a young girl staying at the château in the summer, bringing a lump to her throat.

‘You look skinny. Are you not eating?’ Margaux appraised her.

‘Of course I’m eating, Margaux! Besides, it’s unlikely that I’ll ever fade away.’ Emilie smiled wanly, sweeping her hands down her body.

‘You have a lovely shape – wait until you’re like me!’ Margaux indicated her own plump figure and chuckled.

Emilie looked at the fading blue eyes and blonde hair, now streaked with grey. She remembered Margaux fifteen years ago as a beautiful woman, and felt further depressed at how time destroyed all in its ever-hungry path.

The kitchen door opened again. Through it appeared a young boy, slight of figure, with his mother’s huge blue eyes

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dominating his elfin face. He looked in surprise at Emilie and then turned to his mother nervously.

‘Maman? Is it all right for me to be here?’ he asked Margaux.

‘Do you mind if Anton is here in the château with me while I work, Mademoiselle Emilie? It’s the Easter holidays and I don’t like to leave him at home by himself. He normally sits quietly with a book.’

‘Of course it’s not a problem,’ Emilie replied, smiling at the young boy reassuringly. Margaux had lost her husband eight years ago in a car crash. Since then, she had struggled to bring up her son alone. ‘I think there’s just enough room here for all of us, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mademoiselle Emilie. Thank you,’ Anton said gratefully, walking towards his mother.

‘Gerard Flavier, our *notaire*, is upstairs. He’ll be staying overnight, Margaux,’ Emilie added. ‘We’re going down to the vineyard to see Jean and Jacques.’

‘Then I’ll prepare his bedroom whilst you’re gone. Should I get some food ready for your supper?’

‘No, thank you, we’ll go up to the village to eat later,’ Emilie replied.

‘There are some bills that have arrived for the house, Mademoiselle. Should I give them to you?’ Margaux asked, embarrassed.

‘Yes, of course.’ Emilie sighed. ‘There’s no one else to pay them.’

‘No. I’m so sorry, Mademoiselle. It’s hard for you to be left alone. I know so well how it feels,’ Margaux sympathised.

‘Yes, thank you. I’ll see you later, Margaux.’ Emilie nodded at mother and son and left the kitchen to find Gerard.

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That afternoon, Emilie accompanied Gerard to the *cave*. The vineyard on the de la Martinières domaine was a small operation on ten hectares, producing twelve thousand bottles of the palest rosé, red and white a year, mostly sold to local shops, restaurants and hotels.

Inside, the *cave* was dark and cool, the smell of fermenting wine permeating the air from the huge Russian oak barrels lined up along its sides.

Jean Benoit, the *cave* manager, stood up from behind his desk as they entered.

‘Mademoiselle Emilie! It’s a pleasure to see you.’ Jean kissed her warmly on both cheeks. ‘Papa, look who’s here!’

Jacques Benoit, now in his late eighties and stiff with rheumatism, but who still sat at a table in the *cave* every day, painstakingly wrapping each bottle of wine in purple tissue paper, looked up and smiled. ‘Mademoiselle Emilie, how are you?’

‘I’m well, thank you, Jacques. And you?’

‘Ah, no longer up to hunting the wild boar your papa and I used to catch on the hills.’ He chuckled. ‘But I still manage to find myself breathing each sunrise.’

Emilie felt a surge of pleasure at both the warmth of their greeting and their familiarity. Her father had been great friends with Jacques, and Emilie had often cycled off to the nearby beach at Gigaro for a swim with Jean, who, being eight years older than her, had seemed very grown up. Emilie had sometimes fantasised that he was her older brother. Jean had always been so protective and kind towards her. He had lost his mother, Francesca, when he was young and Jacques had done his best to bring him up alone.

Both father and son, and their ancestors before them, had

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grown up in the small cottage attached to the *cave*. Jean now managed the vineyard, taking over from his father once Jacques was satisfied Jean had learned his special methods of mixing, then fermenting the grapes from the vines that surrounded them.

Emilie realised that Gerard was hovering behind them, looking uncomfortable. Pulling herself from her reverie, she said, 'This is Gerard Flavier, our family *notaire*.'

'I believe we've met before, Monsieur, many years ago,' said Jacques, holding out a trembling hand to him.

'Yes, and I still taste the subtlety of the wine you make here when I'm back in Paris,' remarked Gerard, smiling.

'You are most kind, Monsieur,' said Jacques, 'but I believe my son is even more of an artist when it comes to producing the perfect Provençal rosé.'

'I presume, Monsieur Flavier, that you're here to check the financial facts and figures of our *cave*, rather than the quality of our produce?' Jean was looking uneasy.

'I would certainly like some idea of whether the business is financially productive for my analysis,' confirmed Gerard. 'I'm afraid that Mademoiselle Emilie must make some decisions.'

'Well,' said Emilie, 'I think I'm of little use here for now, so I'll take a walk through the vineyards.' She nodded at the three men and immediately left the *cave*.

As she walked outside, she realised her own discomfort was heightened by the fact that the decisions she must make would endanger the Benoit family's livelihood. Their way of life had remained unchanged for hundreds of years. She could tell that Jean, in particular, was very concerned, understanding the ramifications if she did sell. A new owner might install a

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manager of his own, and Jean and Jacques would be forced to leave their home. She could hardly imagine such a change, for the Benoits seemed to grow out of the very soil she was standing on.

The sun was already on its descent as Emilie walked over the stony ground between the rows of fragile vines. In the following few weeks, they would grow like weeds to produce the fat, sweet fruit that would be picked in the *vendange* of late summer to produce next year's vintage.

She turned to look at the château, three hundred metres in the distance, and sighed despairingly. Its pale, blush-covered walls, the shutters painted a traditional light blue and framed by tall cypress trees on either side, melted into the softness of the approaching sunset. Simply yet elegantly designed to fit in with its rural surroundings, the house reflected perfectly the understated yet noble lineage both of them had been born from.

And we are all that is left . . .

Emilie felt a sudden tenderness for the building. It had been orphaned too. Recognised, but ignored in terms of its basic needs, yet maintaining an air of graceful dignity under duress – she felt an odd camaraderie with it.

‘How can I give you what you need?’ she whispered to the château. ‘What do I do with you? I have a life elsewhere, I . . .’ Emilie sighed and then heard her name being called.

Gerard was walking towards her. He came to stand next to her and followed her eyeline towards the château.

‘It is beautiful, isn't it?’ he said.

‘Yes, it is. But I have no idea what I should do with it.’

‘Why don't we walk back and I'll give you my thoughts

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on the matter, which may or may not be of help to you,' Gerard suggested.

'Thank you.'

Twenty minutes later, as the sun made its final departure behind the hill which accommodated the medieval village of Gassin, Emilie sat with Gerard and listened to what he had to say.

'The vineyard is under-producing what it could, in terms of both yield and profit. There has been an international surge in sales of rosé in the past few years. It's no longer thought of as the poor relation to its white and red sister and brother. Jean is expecting, as long as the weather conditions remain stable in the next few weeks, to produce a bumper crop. The point is, Emilie,' Gerard explained, 'the *cave* has always been run very much as a hobby by the de la Martinières.'

'Yes, I realise that,' Emilie agreed.

'Jean – who I was extremely impressed with, by the way – said no investment funds have been provided for the vineyard since your father died sixteen years ago. It was, of course, originally established to provide the château itself with a home-grown supply of wine. In its heyday, when your ancestors were entertaining here in the old, grand style, much of the wine would have been consumed by them and their guests. Now, of course, everything's different, yet the vineyard is still running as it did a hundred years ago.'

Gerard looked at Emilie for a reaction, but received none, so he continued.

'What the *cave* needs is an injection of cash to fulfil its potential. Jean tells me, for example, that there's enough land to double the size of the vineyards. It also needs some modern equipment to be brought up to date and produce, Jean

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believes, a healthy profit. The question is,' summarised Gerard, 'whether you wish to carry the vineyard and the château into the future. They are both renovation projects and would take up much of your time.'

Emilie listened to the stillness. Not a breath of wind blew. The calm atmosphere wrapped a warm shawl of tranquillity around her. For the first time since her mother had died, Emilie felt at peace. And, therefore, disinclined to come to a conclusion.

'Thank you for your help so far, Gerard. But I don't think it's possible to give you an answer right now,' she explained. 'If you'd asked me two weeks ago, I would have categorically told you my inclination was to sell. But now . . .'

'I understand,' Gerard said with a nod. 'I can't advise you emotionally, Emilie, only financially. Perhaps it would be a comfort for you to know that, when you sell the Paris house, its contents and your mother's jewellery, I believe it would not only cover the cost of restoring the château but also leave you with a large income for the rest of your life. And, of course, there is the library here,' he added. 'Your papa may not have spent his energies on the fabric of either of his homes, but his legacy is housed inside. He built on what was already a fine collection of rare books. Having glanced earlier at the ledgers he kept, he seems to have doubled it. Antiquarian books are not my field of expertise, but I can only imagine the collection is very valuable.'

'I would never part with it,' replied Emilie firmly, surprising herself with her sudden defensiveness. 'It was my father's life's work. I spent many hours here in the library with him as a child.'

'Of course, and there's no reason why you should.'

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Although, if you decide not to keep the château, you may have to find somewhere larger than your Paris apartment to house the collection.' Gerard smiled wryly. 'Now, I must eat. Will you accompany me to the village for supper? I leave early tomorrow, and I must, with your permission, investigate the contents of your father's desk to acquire any further financial papers.'

'Of course,' Emilie agreed.

'First, I must make a couple of calls,' he said apologetically, 'but I'll see you down here in half an hour.'

Emilie watched Gerard as he left the table and walked into the house. She felt awkward in his company, even though he had been present throughout her life. She had treated him then as any child would a distant adult. Now, with a third party no longer present, having a direct conversation with him was a new and uncomfortable experience.

As she wandered inside, Emilie realised she felt patronised, although she understood that Gerard was merely trying to help. But, sometimes, she saw in his eyes what she could only read as resentment. Perhaps he felt – and who could blame him – that she was not in any way accomplished enough to receive the mantle of the last surviving de la Martinières, with all its weight of history. Emilie was painfully aware that she had none of the glamour of her predecessors. Born into an extraordinary family, her only wish was to appear ordinary.

3

Emilie heard Gerard's car making its way along the drive and away from the château early the next morning. She lay in the narrow bed she had slept in since childhood, the room's windows facing north-west so there was little early-morning sun. Of course, she mused, there was no reason why she could not now inhabit any one of the vast and beautiful bedrooms at the front of the house, with their huge windows facing out over the garden and vineyards.

Frou-Frou, who had whined so much last night that Emilie had relented and let her in to sleep on her bed, barked at the door to signal it was time for her morning ablutions.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Emilie made herself some coffee then wandered along the passage to the library. The high-ceilinged room, which her father had always kept shrouded from light to protect the books, smelt comfotingly fusty and familiar. Placing her coffee on her father's worn, leather-topped desk, she walked to a window and drew back one of the shutters. A million dust motes left their hiding places at the sudden and unusual breeze, and danced frenziedly in the soft shafts of light.

Emilie sat down on the window seat and studied the floor-

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to-ceiling bookshelves. She had no idea how many books the library contained. Her father had spent most of his latter years cataloguing and adding to the collection. She stood up and walked slowly around the sides of the room, the books stretching up to four times her height. Sentinel and stoic, she felt as if they were surveying her – their new mistress – and wondering what fate would befall them.

Emilie remembered sitting with her father and playing the Alphabet Game, which entailed her choosing two letters from the alphabet of any combination. When she had chosen them, her father would move around the library searching for an author whose book held those initials. Only very rarely had he failed to produce a book from the two letters Emilie had given him. Even when she tried to be clever with Xs and Zs, her father would manage to procure a fading, battered copy of Chinese philosophy, or a slim anthology by a long-forgotten Russian poet.

Though she'd watched Édouard do this for years, Emilie now wished she'd paid more attention to the eclectic methods her father had of cataloguing and filing the books. As she glanced at the shelves, she knew it was not as simple as alphabetical order. On the shelf in front of her, the books ranged from Dickens to Plato to Guy de Maupassant.

She also knew the collection was so extensive that any cataloguing her father had completed in the ledgers stacked on the desk would have barely scratched the surface. Even though *he* had known where to place his hands on a book almost immediately, it was a skill and a secret Édouard had taken with him to his grave.

'If I'm to sell this house, what would I do with you?' she whispered to the books.

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They gazed back at her silently; thousands of forlorn children who knew their future lay in her hands. Emilie shook herself from her reverie of the past. She could not let emotion sway her. If she decided to sell the château, then the books must be found another home. Closing the shutter and returning the books to their shrouded slumber, she left the library.

Emilie spent the rest of the morning exploring the endless nooks and crannies of the château, suddenly appreciating a wonderful 200-year-old frieze that adorned the ceiling in the magnificent drawing room, the elegant but now shabby French furniture and the many paintings that hung on every wall.

At lunchtime, Emilie made her way into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. She drank it thirstily, realising she felt breathless and exhilarated, as if she'd woken up from a bad dream. The beauty she'd seen so clearly for the first time this morning had been around her for the whole of her life, yet she had never thought to appreciate it or give it credence. And now, rather than seeing her inheritance and her family lineage as a rope around her neck from which she wished to be free, she was experiencing the first traces of excitement.

This wonderful house, with its wealth of exquisite objects, was *hers*.

Feeling suddenly hungry, Emilie rooted around in the fridge and the kitchen cupboards, but to no avail. Taking Frou-Frou under her arm, she put the little dog in the car next to her and drove towards Gassin. Having parked the car, she walked up the ancient steep steps through the village to the hilltop boulevard that housed the bars and restaurants, and took a table at the edge of the terrace in order to admire the

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spectacular coastal view below her. Ordering a small jug of rosé and a house salad, she basked in the strong lunchtime sun, thoughts circling in no particular order around her head.

‘Excuse me, Mademoiselle, but are you Emilie de la Martinières?’

Shading her eyes from the strong sunlight, Emilie looked up at the man standing by her table.

‘Yes?’ She looked askance at him.

‘Then I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.’ The man held out his hand. ‘My name is Sebastian Carruthers.’

Emilie reached out a tentative hand to his in return. ‘Do I know you?’

‘No, you don’t.’

Emilie noticed he spoke excellent French, but with an English accent. ‘Then may I ask how you know me?’ she said, imperious out of nerves.

‘It’s a long story, and one I would like to share with you at some point. Are you expecting company?’ he asked, indicating the empty chair opposite her.

‘I . . . no.’ Emilie shook her head.

‘Then may I sit down and explain?’

Before Emilie had a chance to demur, Sebastian had pulled out the chair opposite her. Without the sunlight blinding her eyes, she studied him and saw that he was probably of a similar age to her, his good quality, casual clothes worn easily on a slim body. He had a smattering of freckles across his nose, chestnut hair and attractive hazel-coloured eyes.

‘I’m sorry to hear of your mother’s death,’ he offered.

‘Thank you.’ Emilie took a sip of her wine and then, her engrained good manners surfacing, said, ‘Can I offer you a glass of rosé?’

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‘That would be very kind.’ Sebastian signalled for the waiter and caught his attention. A glass was placed in front of him and Emilie poured the wine into it from the jug.

‘How did you hear of my mother’s death?’ she asked.

‘It’s hardly a secret in France, is it?’ Sebastian answered, his eyes filling with empathy. ‘She was rather well known. May I offer my condolences? It must be a difficult time for you.’

‘Yes, it is,’ she replied stiffly. ‘So, you’re English?’

‘You guessed!’ Sebastian rolled his eyes in mock horror. ‘And I’ve worked so hard to lose my accent. Yes, I am, for my sins. But I spent a year in Paris studying Fine Art. And I admit to being a fully paid-up Francophile.’

‘I see,’ murmured Emilie. ‘But . . .’

‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘that still doesn’t explain how I knew you were Emilie de la Martinières. Well now –’ Sebastian raised his eyes mysteriously – ‘the connection between you and me goes back into the deep and distant past.’

‘Are you a relation?’ Emilie was reminded suddenly of the warning Gerard had given her only yesterday.

‘No, most definitely not,’ he said with a smile, ‘but my grandmother was half French. I discovered recently that she worked closely with Édouard de la Martinières, who I believe was your father, during the Second World War.’

‘I see.’ Emilie knew almost nothing about her father’s past. Only that he had never discussed it. And she was still nervous of what this Englishman wanted from her. ‘I know little about that time of my father’s life.’

‘I didn’t know much either until my grandmother told me, just before she died, that she was over here during the Occupation. She also said what a brave man Édouard was,’ Sebastian added.

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This revelation brought a sudden lump to Emilie's throat. 'I didn't know . . . You must understand that I was born when my father was sixty, more than twenty years after the war ended.'

'Right,' said Sebastian, nodding.

'Besides,' Emilie took a healthy gulp of wine, 'he was not the kind of man to ever boast about his triumphs.'

'Well, Constance, my grandmother, certainly seemed to hold him in high esteem,' Sebastian said. 'She also told me about the beautiful *château* in Gassin that she'd stayed in whilst she was in France. The house is very close to this village, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Emilie as her salad arrived. 'Will you eat?' she asked, again out of politeness.

'If you're happy to have my company, yes.'

'Of course.'

Sebastian ordered and the waiter retreated.

'So, what brings you to Gassin?' Emilie queried.

'That's a very good question,' Sebastian said. 'After my degree in Fine Art in Paris, I went on to make the art business my career. I show from a small gallery in London, but spend much of my time searching for the rare paintings that my wealthy clients desire. I came to France to try to persuade the owner of a Chagall to sell it to me. The chap lives up in Grasse, which, as you know, isn't far from here,' he explained. 'I happened to read in the newspaper about your mother and that prodded my memory of my grandmother's association with your family. So I thought I'd stop off and take a look for myself at the *château* I'd heard so much about. This really is the most beautiful village.'

'Yes, it is,' she answered, nonplussed by this strange conversation.

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‘So, Emilie, do you live at the château?’ Sebastian asked.

‘No,’ she replied, uncomfortable with his direct line of questioning. ‘I currently live in Paris.’

‘Where I have many friends,’ Sebastian enthused. ‘One day, I hope to spend more time in France, but for now I’m still establishing my reputation in the UK. Not being able to get my hands on the Chagall for my client is very disappointing. It would have been my first negotiation in the big league.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she offered.

‘Thank you. I’ll get over it. You wouldn’t have any price-less paintings which you wanted to shift hanging around in that château of yours, would you?’ Sebastian’s eyes were full of humour.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied truthfully. ‘Valuing the art in the château is on my list of things to do.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be using one of the top Paris experts to authenticate and value the collection. But if you needed a knowledgeable and very much on-the-spot eye to guide you in the interim, I would be happy to oblige.’ As Sebastian’s croque-monsieur arrived, he drew out his wallet and passed Emilie a card. ‘Promise I’m kosher,’ he emphasised. ‘I can provide references from my clients if necessary.’

‘It’s very kind of you, but our family *notaire* is dealing with all that kind of thing.’ Emilie could hear the hauteur in her voice.

‘Of course,’ he said, pouring them both some more rosé and tackling his croque-monsieur. ‘So,’ he swiftly changed the subject, ‘what do you do with yourself in Paris?’

‘I work as a vet in a large practice in the Marais Quarter. The money is not very good, but I love it,’ she answered.

‘Really?’ Sebastian raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m surprised. I’d

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have thought, coming from the family you do, that you'd be involved in something very glamorous, if you even needed to work at all.'

'Yes, that's what everyone assumes . . . I am sorry, but I really must go.' Emilie signalled hurriedly for the bill.

'I do apologise, Emilie, that sounded trite,' Sebastian said immediately. 'What I meant to say is, good on you! I really didn't mean to insult you.'

An urge to get away from this man and his persistent questions suddenly assailed her. Emilie reached for her bag, took some francs out of her purse and put them on the table. 'It was nice to meet you,' she said as she picked up Frou-Frou and walked smartly away from the table. She descended the steep stone steps towards her car as hurriedly as she could, feeling ridiculously shaken and tearful.

'Emilie! Please, wait!'

Taking no notice of the voice behind her, she continued walking down the steps determinedly until Sebastian caught up with her.

'Look,' he panted, 'I'm really sorry if I offended you. I seem to have a knack of doing that . . .' Sebastian kept pace with her as she continued walking. 'If it's any consolation, I was born with endless baggage too. Including a crumbling mansion on the Yorkshire moors that I'm meant to somehow restore and save, when there's not a bean to pay for it.'

They had reached the car and Emilie had no choice but to stand still. 'Then why don't you sell it?' she asked him.

'Because it's part of my heritage and –' he shrugged – 'it's complicated. Anyway, I'm not throwing you a sob story, just trying to explain that I know how it is to be defined by your past. I'm there too.'

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Emilie searched silently for the car key in her bag.

‘I’m not trying to compete with you,’ Sebastian continued, ‘merely trying to say I empathise.’

‘Thank you.’ She’d found her car key. ‘I must go now.’

‘Am I forgiven?’

She turned and looked at him, despairing of her own sensitivity, yet unable to control it. ‘I just . . .’ She stared out across the verdant landscape below her, trying to find the words to explain. ‘I want to be judged for myself.’

‘I understand, I really do. Look, I’m not going to hold you up any more, but it was a pleasure to meet you.’ Sebastian held out his hand. ‘Good luck with it all.’

‘Thank you. Goodbye.’ Emilie unlocked her car and released an irritated Frou-Frou onto the passenger seat. She climbed inside, started the engine and drove off slowly down the hill, trying to understand why she had reacted so violently. Perhaps, used as she was to the formal French protocol of a first meeting, Sebastian’s openness had startled her. But, Emilie told herself, he had simply tried to be friendly. It was *she* who had the problem. Sebastian had pressed her most sensitive button and she’d reacted accordingly. Emilie watched him strolling down the hill a few metres ahead of her and felt guilty and embarrassed.

She was thirty years old, Emilie chastised herself. The de la Martinières estate was hers to do with as she wished. Perhaps it was time she began to behave like an adult, not a temperamental child.

As she drew the car adjacent with Sebastian, taking a deep breath, she wound down the window.

‘As you’ve come all the way here to see the château,

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Sebastian, it would be disappointing if you didn't fulfil your goal. Why don't you let me drive you there?'

'If you're sure . . .' Sebastian's expression echoed the surprise in his voice. 'I mean, of course I'd love to see it, especially with someone who knows the house intimately.'

'Then, please, climb in.' She leant over and unlocked the passenger door for him.

'Thank you,' he said as he closed it behind him and they set off once more down the hill. 'I feel dreadful for upsetting you. Are you sure I'm forgiven?'

'Sebastian,' she sighed, 'it's not you who's at fault, it's me. Any mention of my family in that context is what I think a psychologist would call a "trigger". And I must learn to deal with it.'

'Well, we all have plenty of those, especially when we've had successful, powerful relatives who've gone before us.'

'My mother was certainly a strong character,' Emilie agreed. 'There's a space in many people's lives now she has passed away. As you said, it's a lot to live up to. And I've always known I couldn't.'

Emilie wondered whether the two glasses of wine at lunch had loosened her tongue. But she suddenly didn't feel uncomfortable telling him this. It thrilled and unnerved her at the same time.

'Well, I can hardly say the same of my mum, or "Victoria" as she insisted we called her,' said Sebastian. 'I can't even remember her. She gave birth to my brother and me at a hippy commune in the States. When I was three and my brother two, she arrived with us in England and dumped us both on my grandparents in Yorkshire. A few weeks later she took off

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again, leaving us behind. And she hasn't been seen or heard of since.'

'Oh, Sebastian!' Emilie responded, shocked. 'You don't even know if your mother is still alive?'

'No,' he confirmed, 'but our grandmother more than made up for it. Because we were so young when we were left with her, to all intents and purposes Constance *was* our mother. And I can honestly say that if my real mother ever appeared in a crowded room in front of me, I wouldn't be able to spot her.'

'You were lucky to have your grandmother, but it's still very sad for you,' Emilie sympathised. 'And you don't even know who your father is?'

'No. Or, in fact, whether my brother and I share the same one. We're certainly very different. Anyway . . .' Sebastian stared into the distance.

'Did you know your grandfather?' she asked.

'He died when I was five. He was a fine man, but he'd been out in North Africa during the war and the injuries he sustained there made him very frail. My grandparents were devoted to each other. So my poor old granny not only lost her adored husband, but her daughter too. I think having us grandsons kept her going, actually,' said Sebastian. 'She was the most amazing woman, still drystone-walling at the age of seventy-five and hale and hearty until a week before she fell ill. I'm not sure they make them like her any more,' he mused, a timbre of sadness entering his voice. 'Sorry,' he said suddenly, 'I'm talking too much.'

'Not at all. It's comforting for me to know there are other people who have grown up in difficult circumstances.'

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Sometimes –’ Emilie sighed – ‘I think that having too much of a past is just as bad as having none at all.’

‘I totally agree.’ Sebastian nodded then grinned. ‘Dearie me, if other people heard this conversation, they might think we were a couple of spoilt, privileged kids feeling sorry for ourselves. Let’s face it, neither of us are on the streets, are we?’

‘No. And of course it’s what people would think. Especially of me,’ she agreed. ‘Why should they not? They don’t see what lies beneath. Look –’ she pointed – ‘the château is just down there.’

Sebastian gazed into the distance at the elegant, pale-pink building nestling in the valley beneath them. He let out a whistle. ‘It’s absolutely beautiful, and just how my grandmother described it to me. And rather a contrast to our family home on the bleak moors of Yorkshire. Although the rawness of the surroundings make Blackmoor Hall spectacular in a different way,’ he added.

Emilie turned into the long drive that led to the château then steered along the side of the house to park at the back. She pulled the car to a halt and they climbed out.

‘Are you sure you have time to show me around?’ Sebastian looked at her. ‘I can always come back another day.’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Emilie assured him as she walked with Frou-Frou towards the château and Sebastian followed her through the lobby and into the kitchen.

She took Sebastian from room to room, watching as he paused continually, studying the paintings, the furniture and the vast collection of objets d’art that lay dusty and unvalued on the tops of mantelpieces, bureaux and tables. She led him into the morning room and, straight away, Sebastian walked over to examine a painting.

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‘This reminds me of *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, which Matisse painted in 1904 when he was staying in St Tropez. The stippled effect is similar.’ Sebastian traced his fingers just above the oil. ‘Although this is a pure landscape of rocks and sea, without the figures.’

‘*Luxury, Peace and Pleasure*,’ Emilie repeated in English. ‘I remember my father reading me Baudelaire’s poem.’

‘Yes.’ Sebastian turned, his eyes bright with enthusiasm that she knew it. ‘Matisse took *L’Invitation au Voyage* as his inspiration for the painting. It now hangs in the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris.’ He turned his attention back to the painting in front of him. ‘It isn’t signed from what I can see, unless the name’s hidden under the frame. But it may be that this was some form of a practice run for the actual painting itself. Especially given that Matisse was in St Tropez at the time when his style was so similar to this. And that’s a stone’s throw away from here, isn’t it?’

‘My father knew Matisse in Paris,’ offered Emilie. ‘Apparently he used to come to the salons Papa gave for the creative intelligentsia in the city. I know he liked Matisse very much and spoke of him often, but I don’t know if he ever came down to the château.’

‘Well, like so many other artists and writers, Matisse spent the Second World War years down here in the south, out of harm’s way. Matisse is my absolute passion.’ Sebastian was quivering with excitement. ‘May I remove it from the wall to see if there’s any dedication on the back? Often pictures would be given by artists to generous benefactors. Such as your father, perhaps.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Emilie went to stand next to Sebastian as he tentatively gripped the frame and lifted it carefully from

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the wall, revealing a square of darker wallpaper behind it. He turned the painting round to study the back with Emilie, but there was nothing to be seen.

‘Never mind, it’s not the end of the world,’ Sebastian reassured her. ‘If Matisse had signed it, it would simply be a less complex process to prove that it is his work.’

‘You really think it is?’

‘With the provenance you’ve just described, and the trademark stippling, which Matisse was experimenting with around the period he painted *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, I’d say there’s every chance it is. Obviously, it would have to go to the experts for authentication.’

‘And if it *is* a Matisse, how valuable would it be?’ she asked.

‘Given there’s no signature, I wouldn’t be experienced enough to judge. Matisse was extremely prolific and lived a very long life. Would you want to sell the painting?’

‘That, again, is another query to put on my list.’ Emilie gave an exhausted shrug.

‘Well,’ he said as he hung the painting carefully back in its rightful place, ‘I certainly have some contacts who would be able to establish its authenticity, but I’m sure your *notaire* will wish to use his own. Thank you, though, for showing it to me, and the rest of this wonderful château.’

‘My pleasure,’ said Emilie, leading him out of the morning room.

‘You know –’ Sebastian scratched his head as they stood in the entrance hall – ‘I’m sure my grandmother mentioned the amazing collection of rare books that she’d once seen here, or am I imagining things?’

‘No.’ Emilie realised she’d managed to overlook the library on her tour. ‘It’s just along here. I’ll show you.’

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‘Thank you, as long as you have time,’ he countered.
‘I do.’

Sebastian was suitably awed on entering the library. ‘My goodness,’ he said as he made his way slowly around the shelves, ‘this is a simply outstanding collection. God knows how many books there are in here – do you know? Fifteen, twenty thousand?’

‘I really have no idea.’

‘Are they catalogued? In any kind of order?’ he questioned.

‘They’re in the order my father chose to put them, and his father before that. The collection was begun over two hundred years ago. The newer acquisitions are catalogued, yes.’ Emilie indicated the leather ledgers sitting on her father’s desk.

Sebastian opened one, turned the pages and saw the hundreds of entries made in Édouard’s immaculate handwriting. ‘I know this isn’t any of my business, Emilie, but really, this is an extraordinary collection. I can see from this that your father purchased many rare first editions, not to mention the books already here. This must be one of the finest collections of rare books in France. They should be professionally catalogued on a database.’

Emilie sat down in her father’s leather armchair, feeling overwhelmed. ‘My God,’ she murmured, ‘there seems to be more and more to do. I’m realising that organising my parents’ affairs is going to be a full-time job.’

‘A worthwhile one, surely?’ Sebastian said encouragingly.

‘But I have another life, a life that I like. That is quiet and –’ Emilie wanted to say ‘safe’, but knew that sounded strange – ‘organised.’

Sebastian strolled over to her then knelt down next to her, leaning his arm on her chair for support. ‘I do understand,

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Emilie. And if you want to return to that life, then you must simply find people you trust to sort all this out for you.'

'Who *can* I trust?' she asked the air.

'Well, you mentioned your *notaire*, for a start,' Sebastian suggested. 'Maybe you could place everything in his hands?'

'But . . .' Tears pricked the back of her eyes. 'Surely I owe it to my family and its history? I cannot simply run away.'

'Emilie,' Sebastian said gently, 'it's very early days, of course you're feeling overwhelmed. Your mother has only been gone for a couple of weeks. You're still in shock, still grieving. Why not give yourself some time to make the right decisions?' He patted her hand then stood up. 'I must be off, but you have my card, and it goes without saying I'd be happy to help you in any way I can. This château is manna from heaven for me, especially the paintings, of course.' He smiled. 'Anyway, I'm almost certainly going to stay in Gassin for a while, so if you decide you'd like me to set about the process of having the possible Matisse authenticated, just call me on the mobile number on my card.'

'Thank you,' said Emilie, checking that she still had his card in her jean pocket.

'I'd also be happy to find out the names of the best rare books and antique furniture dealers through my contacts in Paris. At the very least,' added Sebastian, 'whatever you decide to do with the château, it's probably a good idea to know the value of what you own. Presumably your parents must have had some form of insurance?'

'I have no idea.' She shrugged, inwardly doubting it knowing her father and making a mental note to ask Gerard. 'I appreciate your advice,' she said gratefully as she stood up. She gave Sebastian a weak smile as she led him through the

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house to the back door and out towards her car. 'I'm sorry I seem . . . emotional. It's unlike me. Perhaps, another time, we can talk about what your grandmother told you of my father during the war.'

'I'd like that – and please don't apologise,' he added as they climbed into the car. 'You're not only bereaved, but it seems you've been left with one hell of a task on your hands.'

'I will cope. I must,' said Emilie, starting the engine and setting off down the drive.

'And I'm sure you will. As I said, if there's anything I can do to help, you know how to contact me.'

'Thank you.'

'My gîte is just to the left down there –' Sebastian indicated a turning – 'so if you drop me here, I can walk the rest of the way. It's such a beautiful afternoon.'

'OK.' She brought the car to a halt. 'Thank you again.'

'Take care, Emilie,' he said as he climbed out. Then, with a wave of his hand, Sebastian ambled off down the road.

Emilie reversed the car and drove back to the château. Unsettled, she walked aimlessly from room to room, feeling the sharp emptiness of the lack of human presence.

As night fell and the temperature dropped, Emilie sequestered herself in the kitchen by the range, eating the cassoulet Margaux had left for her. Her appetite had deserted her and Frou-Frou happily reaped the benefit.

After supper, she bolted the back door and turned the key in the lock. Taking herself upstairs, she ran a slow stream of tepid water into the ancient, limescale-covered bath. She lay in it, musing morbidly how it fitted her length exactly, making it a perfect prototype for her coffin. Climbing out of the bath,

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she towelled herself dry then, unusually, let the towel drop to the floor in front of the full-length mirror.

With effort, Emilie forced herself to survey her naked body. She'd always regarded it as a piece of substandard equipment, given out at random in the genetic lottery. Stocky as a child, in her teenage years she'd become plump. Despite her mother's pleas to eat healthily and less, somewhere around seventeen Emilie had given up the endless round of cucumber and melon diets prescribed, covered her imperfect torso in loose-fitting and comfortable clothes and let nature take its course.

At the same time, she had also refused to attend further parties, designed to introduce her to the *crème de la crème* of young men and women her age. *Le Rallye* was organised by a group of mothers to make sure their progeny would meet suitable friends and possible future partners of similar class. The competition to be part of an *élite rallye* for the most socially aware French teenagers was intense. Valérie, with her *de la Martinières* name, could attract anyone who she wished to become a member of her own group. She had despaired when Emilie had announced she would no longer be a part of the cocktail parties in grand private homes which formed the heart of the event.

'How can you turn your back on your birthright?' Valérie had asked, outraged.

'I hate them, Maman. I am more than a surname and a bank account. I'm sorry, but no more.'

As Emilie looked in the mirror at her full breasts, rounded hips and shapely legs, she realised she must have lost weight in the last few weeks. What she saw, even to her critical eye, surprised her. Although her bone structure would never allow

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her to be sylph-like, she was not, by any stretch of the imagination, fat.

Before she began, as she inevitably would, to pick fault, Emilie removed herself from her reflection, donned her night-shirt and climbed into bed. Switching off the light and listening to the perfect silence around her, she wondered what had prompted her uncharacteristic naked revelation.

It had been six years since she'd last had what could loosely be termed as a boyfriend. Olivier, an attractive new vet at her Paris practice, had not lasted much longer than a few weeks. She hadn't even particularly liked him, but at least a warm body beside her at night, someone to talk to occasionally over dinner, had eased the loneliness of her existence. Olivier had eventually disappeared, she knew, through lack of effort on her part.

Emilie didn't really know what love was comprised of – a mixture of physical attraction, a meeting of minds . . . a *fascination*, perhaps. But she knew she had never fallen in love. Besides, who would ever love *her*?

That night, Emilie tossed and turned, feeling her mind might burst with the decisions she must make and the responsibility she couldn't shirk. But, more than that, her sleep was disturbed by the picture in her mind's eye of Sebastian.

Even for the short time he'd been in the château, she'd felt a security in his presence. He seemed capable, solid and . . . yes, he was very attractive. When his hand had touched hers for an instant in the library, she hadn't flinched as she normally did when somebody invaded her personal space.

Emilie chastised herself. How sad and lonely she must be that a man she'd met by chance for no longer than a couple of hours had affected her like this. Besides, why on earth

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would a man as seemingly accomplished and handsome as Sebastian look at her twice? He was out of her league and the chances were she'd never come across him again. Unless, of course, she called the number on the card he'd given her and asked for his help with valuing of the Matisse . . .

Emilie shook her head grimly, knowing she'd never gather the courage to do that.

It was a road to nowhere. She'd decided years ago that life was best lived alone. Then no one could hurt her or let her down again. And with that thought lodged firmly in her brain, Emilie finally drifted off to sleep.