

## Chapter 1

Why do you go on with these questions? I know my story is strange but don't delude yourself. I'm not mad. And I swear to you I am not now, nor have I ever been, under the influence of narcotics—except for the brief period to which I've confessed and for which I cannot be held responsible. That I have survived this calamity is a miracle.

The outward signs of my condition, the tremor in my limbs, my periods of acute nervousness, may be cause for alarm; but given the nightmare I've been through, these effects should be understandable. I began my misadventure in a robust state, but you must understand that my escape from the chateau came at great cost to me.

At the outset, I was unaware my status was that of a prisoner rather than an employee. Who could imagine a setting of such grandeur and proportion was little more than a cell: the vaulted ceilings, the marble halls ending in a sweeping staircase, the chandeliers gleaming overhead? To penetrate the dangers of my predicament from the first would have required sharper powers than my twenty-one years afforded.

Yes, I was a fool to place so much faith on the report of my eyes. But here was a setting of overblown beauty. Although tarnished and neglected, the architecture seduced me with its decadence; its decay so alluring that my usual requirements for restraint and order fled from my mind. How could I know such opulence was a snare? Or that the moment I set my suitcase down upon the marble tiles, I'd unleashed forces that would threaten my life and endanger people whom I came to love.

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Madame de Villiers, the woman who had hired me sight unseen was still in Paris when I arrived at the Chateau l'Ombre outside the small village of Sainte Enimie, an eight hour drive south of the City of Lights. The housekeeper, Mrs. de Toi, settled me into my rooms but could provide no explanation as to my employer's whereabouts

except to say that she had been delayed. Having been specific in my itinerary, I was disappointed to find the chateau empty, except for a handful of servants, too few in numbers to maintain the premises at optimum standards. Still, the rooms to which I was assigned were light and airy, consisting of a bathroom, a dressing alcove and a bedroom with tall windows that looked out upon the winding driveway at the front of the house. Beyond it, an expanse of lawn spread like a carpet into a distant grove of trees, a mixture of deciduous and evergreen.

Mrs. de Toi started to help me unpack while I took a moment to stare from the windows at a flock of birds, specks against a cerulean summer sky. The atmosphere seemed serene.

With a sigh, I turned to ask my new acquaintance how long she had been in service at the chateau. She was a stout woman in her midfifties,

her hair the color of steel. Her black dress and gray stockings were the traditional garments of a servant, but she wore them with a confidence that suggested both pride and authority.

“For many years, Mademoiselle. Since Madame de Villiers and...” A cloud drifted across her expression but the moment passed almost imperceptibly. She shrugged before continuing. “Since Madame was no more than six years old.”

Whatever the thought that had disturbed her countenance, the affection in her voice for her mistress was strong enough for me to remark upon it. “She seems like a daughter to you, then.”

“It’s true,” the housekeeper answered but added nothing more.

She headed for the alcove to place a few of my dresses upon padded hangers that exuded a lavender scent. I followed her to continue our conversation. “I haven’t brought much. Perhaps there are shops in the village you can recommend?”

“Sainte Enimie is so small, Mademoiselle. You’ll find nothing stylish here, especially as fall approaches and the tourists begin to leave. The next time Madame drives to Paris, you might accompany her. She likes to shop and knows all the best places.”

“Does she go to Paris often?”

I was eager to learn all I could about my new employer, Odeil de Villiers, a woman completely unknown to me. I’d obtained my position through Mrs. Crofter, the Dean of Students at Mills College, just as I was about to graduate with honors in French History. She’d called me to her office and told me I had an opportunity to live in France for a year to help with research on the history of a place called *Chambre l’Ombre*. I’d hardly been able to believe my good fortune when I heard her. My parents had died in a car accident two years earlier, and I’d been slow to recover from the shock. The thought of escaping to the romantic setting of the Gorges du Tarn had been more than I could have wished for—a new environment, a fresh beginning—although it struck me as odd that a local French scholar should not have been hired for the job.

The Dean waved my reservation aside. “I know the woman slightly. We met at some antiquities conference. She is a supporter of these gatherings and makes a sizeable financial contribution, though is not a scholar, herself. Anyway, she wrote me about the position and you fit the requirements exactly. You needn’t worry about your qualifications. She’s interested in putting together something small. Something for the tourists. Nothing academic. You love history and your French is excellent. Why shouldn’t you go? You certainly deserve the opportunity.”

Whether I deserved it or not wasn’t in my thoughts. The truth was my parents had died without leaving a will, forcing me, their only child, to go through probate to obtain my small inheritance. In the meantime, I’d had to earn my living expenses by working two part-time jobs on campus. In the afternoons I made salads in the cafeteria. In the evenings, I manned the desk at the library.

Fortunately, my scholarship paid my tuition; but after two years of working while carrying a full academic schedule, I was both weary and depressed.

Fortunately, the Dean had apprised my prospective employer of my circumstances and Madame de Villiers had been kind enough to provide traveling expenses and a little pocket money. A week after

graduation, I was aboard Continental Airlines flight 905 headed for a new life. The year was 1960.

Mrs. de Toi either hadn't heard or was disinclined to answer my question about the frequency of Madame's trips to Paris. She kept pacing from my suitcase to the closet, attending to the task of unpacking without saying anything more. I decided not to press the matter. For the moment, I was happy to have arrived and to find myself in this lovely setting. In time, I told myself, all would be revealed.

When the ormolu clock on the mantle chimed five in the afternoon, the housekeeper, having finished her task, looked surprised at the lateness of the hour. "Madame should have arrived by now," she frowned. Then she headed for the door, pausing long enough to inform me that dinner was at eight.

Once I was alone, I sauntered about my rooms, admiring the striped gold and white wall paper, the ladderbacked chairs with embroidered seat covers and the large mahogany four-poster bed that stood to the left of the fireplace. The hearth was stacked with kindling and logs, waiting to be lit. Despite the summer season, the room was chilly so I struck a match from the crystal jar on the mantle and ignited the paper beneath the kindling. Soon the wood began to crackle and send warmth throughout the room. Setting a ladderbacked chair beside the fire, I sat amazed by my good fortune and gloating a little that my classmates back home were probably pounding the pavement in search of jobs.

I confess I hadn't arrived in France totally ignorant of my future circumstances. The college library provided me with some information. I knew the chateau crept along the ridge of a high embankment that overlooked the Tarn. The river was not a large tributary but it stretched like a blue vein across a landscape dominated by scrub wood and rocks.

As to the design, the chateau had been the work of the Italian architect, Girolamo della Robbia, who also designed the Chateau Madrid and who lived during the reign of Francis I (1515-1547). His concept, unlike anything else in French construction, called for

unusual height, decorated with external galleries running between turrets. This chateau, like the Madrid, featured a high-pitched roof and a true loggia, decadent grandeur that had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Nonetheless to my eye, the construct was fresh and magical.

The hour of eight o'clock came and went and when Madame de Villiers still had not returned, I was obliged to have supper in my rooms. After that, I retired early, anxious for a new day to begin. I slept fitfully and awoke the next morning in a groggy state when Mrs. de Toi threw back the blue velvet drapes from the windows. Although the sky was bright and clear, the housekeeper looked worried. She confessed she'd had no word from the mistress and wondered if I'd mind joining her in the kitchen for breakfast. Naturally, I agreed and dressed hurriedly.

The room in which I found her can only be described as cavernous. It was warmed by a great fireplace and a pair of ovens in which bread was baking. Once I'd seated myself at the oak table, the cook placed a mug of rich, dark coffee in front of me, together with a plate of fresh rolls and a quantity of strawberry jam.

There could be little doubt the kitchen was the hub of the chateau's working community for Mathiam Fourbe, the groundskeeper, soon appeared. He was a shy man, somewhere in his sixties with grizzled hair and calloused hands that testified to years of labor. After being introduced, he settled himself at the table several chairs away. If he was short on conversation, he was enthusiastic about his food, tackling with gusto the sweet rolls and tea Mrs. de Toi set before him. I found him difficult to watch as he smacked his lips appreciatively and occasionally poked a finger between his lips to extrude bits of food that had caught in the spaces where his teeth were missing.

Mrs. de Toi, apparently, saw nothing lacking in his manners. She seemed protective of him, in fact, perhaps because they'd been employed at the chateau at about the same time. When he left us that morning, she appeared comfortable enough in my company to confide that Mathiam labored harder than was right for a man of his

years but had to do so as few people from the village were available to work the grounds.

“Mathiam does his best with the landscape as do I with the rooms, but young people aren’t interested in service anymore. They flee to the cities to make their fortune...or, so they think. Of course, it’s true we can’t compete with city wages, but there isn’t much expense to live here, either. Anyway, where’s the pride in honest labor anymore?” She turned to me for corroboration and, although I was a child of flight myself, I assented to her opinion, eager for us to become friends.

Satisfied with my response, she sliced off another wedge from a loaf fresh from the oven and dropped it on to my plate. “You could use a little meat on those bones,” she said with a degree of affection. For the better part of the morning, having no assignment, I lingered in the kitchen, helping where I could. A couple of girls came up from the village, and I listened while they were given their instructions before they drifted off, giggling. They weren’t more than fifteen or sixteen and were apparently doing odd jobs for the summer. Mrs. de Toi looked disdainful as they headed for the upstairs bedrooms to change the sheets. “Good thing Analeese is upstairs waiting for them. She’ll sort them out.”

Analeese, I discovered, was a young woman, about my age, who had married a year earlier and was several months pregnant. Mrs. de Toi busied herself with preparations for evening supper. She was making a stew and I decided to help with the cleaning and chopping of vegetables fresh from the garden. She seemed to enjoy my company and talked freely about her background. She’d had a brief marriage that ended badly; but that was all she said about the experience. She preferred to talk of her family, a sister who lived with her husband on a farm just outside of Valence. She had two nieces and a nephew she saw seldom because her duties at the chateau took priority but she spoiled them with parcels sent by post as often as she could. Christmas was the one holiday she never missed at the farm and from the glow in her cheeks, one could see she looked forward to that time of year. Of course, she assured me, her affection for her

relatives did nothing to diminish her devotion to Madame de Villiers, whom she'd raised since infancy, nor for Mathiam who was a lifelong friend.

Curious about her relationship with the gardener, I asked if he had a wife and she confirmed that he once had, a woman named Cloutilde, whom he'd loved to distraction. Regrettably, she'd been killed by a bomb that had landed in the village during World War II. She'd been four months pregnant at the time, and the loss of both wife and child was a tragedy from which Mathiam had never fully recovered.

With the stew simmering on the stove, Mrs. de Toi turned to the task of making a pie, while at the same time she began to reminisce about her early days with my employer. From the way she kept looking in the direction of the hall, as if expecting the front door to open at any minute, I knew she was worried about her mistress. Talking seemed to calm her and I was eager to listen. I sat warming my hands around my third mug of coffee as the cook, covered in flour, told me about the family she'd come to serve as a young woman.

"The boys were in their teens. Robert at fourteen was the oldest. Henry was a year younger, and then there was Madame de Villiers, a brown-eyed nymph of six. The boys teased her mercilessly as boys do with little sisters. I'm afraid I coddled her to make things even. I say 'coddled' so as not to be mistaken for spoiled. She had such a sweet nature. She could never be spoiled." The pride in Mrs. de Toi's voice was evident. "Not like her mother," she went on. "There was a pampered woman if ever there was one. Always off to one health clinic or another to indulge herself. Her husband became quite lonely so it's natural that he had a wandering eye..." Mrs. de Toi put down her rolling pin to look at me. "You know what I mean. It's not good to leave a man alone so much of the time."

"Was there no love between the husband and wife, then?"

"There might have been. What I do know is that theirs was an arranged marriage: a merger, if you like, between two prominent families. On the paternal side was money. On the other was

impoverished aristocracy.”

Mrs. de Toi went on to say the marriage might have lasted many years, if only for convenience, except for the war. Monsieur de Villiers, unfortunately, thought it his duty to join the resistance. His attempt at espionage proved unsuccessful. He was captured and executed by the Germans. Mrs. de Toi crossed herself before going on.

“He died well, they say, singing La Marseillaise before a firing squad. But the wife? She had no courage. She was afraid she, too, might be suspected, so she locked herself in her rooms, leaving the care of the family to me.”

“And where are they now? The boys, I mean.”

“Dead. Like their father, they joined the resistance.”

“Both of them?”

The cook nodded as the tears she could no longer control rolled down her floured cheeks. “Only Odeil, my sweet one, survived.”

“What became of the mother? Did she die, too?”

“She emerged from her rooms when the Vichy government was dismantled, behaving as if nothing had happened. I thought then that her mind had snapped. Fortunately, her husband had had the foresight to make arrangements with his Paris attorney for his family. Monsieur Larouche was the attorney’s name. He’s gone now, too, as he was old even then; but he drafted a document that left the family well provided for and gave my little one a good education. Of course, part of the fortune was stolen by the Germans, but the de Villiers family had more than most when the war was over.

“I understand you’ve been hired to help Madame write a little history of the chateau. She wants to make the place a tourist attraction and use the profits to restore the estate.”

“Yes. I hope I can help.” The cook’s remark brought me up sharp, my thoughts having drifted back to what I imagined the place might have looked like during the war. “But you didn’t say what happened to the mother? Where is she now?”

Mrs. de Toi shrugged guiltily. “Apparently, she was not the hypochondriac I supposed. She died of a blood disease not long after

peace was declared.”

“So, Madame has no family?”

“Like you, my little bird, she flies solo.”

“You know about my parents?”

“I heard something about your loss, yes. But you’ll find a new family here. Madame is so kind. She’ll be more like a sister to you than an employer. There isn’t much age difference between you, is there? Maybe ten years? Being young women, you’ll find you have much in common.”

Despite Mrs. de Toi’s happy prognostication for the future, her prediction proved untrue with regard to the weather. The day that had begun with a clear, blue sky brought an afternoon of unhappy rain—a downpour that seemed to dig its fingers into the earth as if eager to upend every shrub in the gardens. Even the trees, less vulnerable to the downpour, were threatened by flashes of lightning. I decided to retreat to my room with its cozy fire.

The ormolu clock on my mantle had struck four and I was standing at my window when a Peugeot threaded its way along the gravel driveway. I watched it stop beneath my window, the storm pelting its black exterior. I should have had a clear view of the driver but what emerged from the car was a black umbrella, beneath which I glimpsed a pair of red stilettos. Madame de Villiers, I surmised, had arrived.

Footsteps could be heard scurrying along the hall. Mrs. de Toi, clucking like a mother hen, apparently, had opened the door, for what I heard next were squeals and peals of laughter. To get a better view, I abandoned my room and hurried toward the top of the staircase. Looking down, I saw the housekeeper hugging the woman I presumed was my new employer.

With her bags retrieved and her wet outer garments removed, I had a good look at the new arrival—a woman with a trim figure dressed in a form-fitting black suit. She looked up as if sensing my presence.

“Can this be Rachel? Rachel Farraday?” Her voice reminded me of crystal wind chimes and, as I descended the stairs, she held her

arms out to me. We embraced rather than shook hands, and I was delighted to find her so warm and unpretentious. She made me feel as if she had known me my whole life.

“I’m so happy to have you with us at last,” she said stepping back to look at me. “I’m sorry I was detained, but I’m sure Amelia...that is, Mrs. de Toi, made you comfortable?”

I nodded, feeling a bit shy with both women now scrutinizing me as if I were an unfamiliar painting. Yet, I confess, I did the same. Of Madame de Villiers it can be truly said she was a work of art. Nefertiti came immediately to mind, for in the face of my new acquaintance I saw the same almond-shaped eyes, the arched brows and long curve of the neck that identifies that long ago queen. Every manner, every gesture, spoke of her aristocratic breeding although, as I’ve said, nothing in her manner was aloof.

As we stood taking one another in, I discovered we were of equal height, both tall and slim. We probably could have exchanged wardrobes with ease. As to complexion, however, we were in marked contrast: she was fair, almost the color of a lily, with auburn hair that she wore in a chignon. I was still tanned by the California sun and my black hair was inelegantly pulled back in a ponytail. As to her age, my employer looked younger than her thirty years but exuded an air of confidence appropriate to a woman twice her years. In sum, I liked her and felt certain that ours would be a happy collaboration.

Mrs. de Toi returned to the kitchen to make sandwiches and a pot of cocoa while the two of us headed for the sitting room where a roaring fire awaited. Even in summer, I was to learn, a fire in this cavernous place was a necessity.

The room my employer and I entered was large and vaulted, its ceiling ornamented with a host of mythical figures. Although the paint had faded, the beauty of design needed no improvement. Rich, too, were the pomegranate walls and the dark woodwork. It was a perfect burrowing place.

After the cocoa had been served, Madame leaned back in the upholstered chair that seemed too large for her, and sighed. “It’s so good to be home. I am never really happy unless I am here. I hope

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you will find it so, Rachel, if I may call you that?”

I nodded.

“And you must call me Odeil. I hate ‘Madame,’ it makes me sound so old.”

“You are hardly that.” I smiled.

“Sometimes...sometimes,” she insisted, “I feel much older than my years. There’s so much to be done.” Her eyes wandered about the room with that same look of appraisal with which she had greeted me. As if satisfied all was as she’d left it, she sighed again. “Forgive me. I’ve not asked if you’re comfortable in your rooms. Has Mrs. de Toi seen to your needs?”

She did not wait for my reply, but answered her own question.

“Of course, she has. She’s a darling and she likes to make a fuss, does she not?”

“She’s been very kind to me,” I agreed. “She does seem to anticipate my needs.”

“Yes, she has that knack. I couldn’t do without her. And she manages the day servants so well.”

“I noticed she seems to be the only one in residence. She told me her husband is no longer about.”

A pale hand waved through the air in a dismissive gesture. “The man was a drunkard and unreliable. He ran off with another woman years ago. Mathiam is the only other permanent employee. He sleeps in the carriage house. The rest of the workers, as you’ve noted, are day laborers from the village.”

“Mrs. de Toi said it’s difficult to keep servants?”

“True. I’m afraid no one cares to be in service these days. Most of the young people leave for the cities as soon as they can. A few stay on the family farms or work in the local shops. But yes, there seems to be a perpetual turnover. And of course, these young people expect to be paid the earth. But I have plans and I’m confident, with your help, I shall breathe life into the old place.” She glanced about the room with a tender expression as if looking through a family album.

“I understand your hope is to make the chateau a tourist

attraction.”

“If I can. That’s why the work you and I will perform is so important. We must advertise the place, create an interest. Then people will come and workers will come and I’ll have enough money to renovate the estate.”

“That’s a pretty tall order coming from a piece of writing.”  
Madame leaned forward, her eyes shining in the fire’s light.

“Yes, but we can do it. I know we can. Dean Crofter, from your college, spoke so highly of you. And I’m relying on you to set the pace. I’m one too easily distracted, so you must be the taskmaster.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, uneasily. “When do we begin?”

“Tomorrow, if you feel up to it. I don’t suppose you’ve had a chance to see much of the chateau. Why don’t you wander around this afternoon and we’ll start early in the morning, say nine o’clock?”

Amused that she would think the hour of nine was early, I assented.

“Good,” she went on. “Then after our tea you must excuse me. It’s been a long drive and I’m feeling tired. Dinner’s at eight. Did Mrs. de Toi tell you? I’ll probably have something in my room so I’ll see you in the morning. Enjoy your self-guided tour and when we have a sunny day, Mathiam can show you the grounds. They’re quite lovely.”

“I’ve done some exploring already. The rose garden is gorgeous. I’ve never seen so many varieties.”

“Yes, Mathiam has a good eye for mixing colors, doesn’t he? I never begrudge his requests. Money spent on flowers gives a handsome return, I always think.”

Madame and I parted soon after her observation, leaving me to amuse myself however I chose. Not wanting to disturb Mrs. de Toi, I wandered up to my rooms to read. A cheery fire greeted me while outside the tempest continued to flay the landscape.

Once I’d seated myself in a comfortable chair with an afghan tossed over my knees, I was so cozy I managed to turn only a few pages of my novel before falling asleep. The rest of the afternoon was spent in a luxurious cycle of dozing and reading and dozing again.

Once or twice I rose to add a log to the fire but that was the extent of my exertion for the day.

When Mrs. de Toi brought my supper tray that evening, she found me asleep with the book dropped on the floor beside me. The delicious aroma of the bowl of stew she was setting in front of me woke me. She'd added a glass of red wine, crusty bread, some grapes and a generous wedge of camembert, as well.

"I've no doubt you're hungry," she said, stepping back with her hands folded in front of her to view with satisfaction the meal she had provided.

"This looks wonderful," I said and I began eating hungrily.

Pleased with my approval, she pulled the curtains across the windows and instructed me to leave the tray outside my door when I had finished. She then headed for the door but not before reminding me that breakfast was at eight. Now that Madame had returned, I was informed, I would join the mistress in the dining room.

An hour or two later, my eyelids were so heavy I crawled under my comforter and turned off the bedside lamp. For a time, I lay listening to the rain pounding impotently against my windows. Not since I was a child asleep in the arms of one of my parents had I felt so cosseted.

The morning landscape, washed by the earlier rains, greeted me the next day as I pulled back the drapes from my windows. Without glancing at the clock, I knew the hour was early, as the sun was barely above the horizon. The fire in the hearth had gone out and, as the room was chilly, I was about to crawl back into my bed when a day girl entered with morning coffee. Noticing the chill, she busied herself with relighting the fire. As she did, the ormolu clock chimed the hour of seven.

Before leaving, the servant informed me, it being a fine day, breakfast would be served on the rose terrace instead of the dining room, and that Madame de Villiers was already up and dressing. Surprised, I hurried to do the same but despite my best effort, I found my employer seated at a wrought iron table when I arrived.

"Good morning," she said cheerily, looking up from a letter

several pages long that she held in her hand. She'd been so preoccupied with it, she hadn't seen me until I was upon her. Seating myself across from her, I was delighted by the array of fruits and rolls and cheeses in front of me. As yet, Madame de Villiers had touched nothing.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," I apologized. As I spoke, I couldn't help admiring the classic cut of her cashmere outfit—camel colored pants and a plum colored sweater set off by an expensive pearl choker. My cotton skirt and nylon pullover left me feeling shabby.

"You're not late in the least," she assured me. "It's just gone past half past the hour if I heard the hall clock correctly. We're both up early. I hope you slept well."

"Very well, thank you. In fact, I slept through most of yesterday afternoon, too."

"Jet lag, no doubt. You mustn't feel guilty. The rest has done you good. Your cheeks are positively rosy."

She poured me a cup of coffee from an ornate silver service while I reached for a croissant and a triangle of camembert. Her attention drifting back to her letter, I luxuriated in my pleasant surroundings. The morning was the complete opposite of yesterday and, with the sun at my back, I began to feel almost too warm. I might have been tempted to doze off again, but when a frown clouded the porcelain complexion opposite me, I had to ask if anything was the matter. My employer looked up and folded her letter into a tight square, which she tucked into her pants pocket. "No, nothing of significance. Some dreary correspondence from my lawyer, that's all. Unfortunately, I shall have to return to Paris."

My face must have reflected my disappointment for she was quick to reassure me. "You needn't worry. I don't have to leave right away. We'll start our project first. Then, once you're occupied, you'll hardly notice I'm gone. I won't be away long in any case."

Our breakfast ended, we proceeded to the library where we were to begin our work. A fire was already blazing in the hearth but much of the room lay in shadows. The color of the walls appeared to be a

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faded gold although little of it could be seen, the three walls being occupied from floor to ceiling by shelves crammed with books. A bay window opened to a view of the eastern lawn and the grove of trees. My room, directly above it, had the same view, although it provided a deeper vista that included the road winding up to the front of the house.

My employer stood beside me, taking in the scene. "It's a lovely landscape, isn't it? Sometimes I'm so distracted by it, I've been known to stare out the windows for hours... But the books, they have their fascination, too, do they not?" She pulled one slim volume from a shelf and read aloud a few lines from the *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam.

We are no other than a moving Row  
Of magic Shadow-Shapes that come and go  
Round with the Sun-illumin'd Lantern held  
In Midnight by the Master of the Show.

Her voice was sonorous, perhaps even sad, but that impression passed like a puff of wind once she smiled again.

"When you have time to acquaint yourself with the collection, you will find it unique, Rachel. Most of the works have been handed down, some from centuries past. I suspect there are sources here one won't find at the Bibliotheque."

Her pride of ownership was reflected not only in her voice but in the care she lavished upon the space. In this room there were no ceiling cracks, no dust left to settle in corners. Her cavernous desk was freshly polished and appointed with appropriate writing tools. An electric typewriter stood nearby, and even the leather chairs with their inviting pillow shapes gleamed as if they had been oiled.

"I'm surprised all these treasures survived the war," I said, taking in the room. "One would think the Germans would have looted everything. So much art and antiquities were lost that way."

"They never found our important treasures." Madame's eyes sparked with triumph. "We were able to hide most of them...but not all. We had to leave something for the looters or they'd have grown suspicious."

“Hide them? Where? Not in the chateau, surely?”

“Ah, that’s a story for another day. First, I’d like you to acquaint yourself with the materials we have on hand that pertain to the chateau’s history. If we need more, make a list and I’ll look for resources when I return to Paris.”

I had seated myself on the window seat and was looking into the room. She joined me. “All this knowledge recorded and sent down to us through the ages. It’s a wonder, isn’t it? Some of these histories, like those of Thucydides, were written over a thousand years ago. Yet, in 1960 we can share his thoughts, see the past as he saw it. Is that not time travel?”

I smiled in sympathy with her meaning. “It’s true, Madame. Historians write for unborn generations, don’t they?”

My employer gave one of my hands a pat. “There, I knew we were kindred spirits. I was sure of it the moment I set eyes on you. We’re going to become great friends, you and I. And please, call me Odeil, not Madame. If we’re going to work together, we must work as colleagues.”

I nodded to her request and didn’t feel uncomfortable with it. In the short time we’d been together I, too, had formed an opinion, and mine was that Madame de Villiers was a person too far above the ordinary, too ethereal, to be treated as an equal. As a consequence, in the days that followed I took pains to avoid any form of address rather than treat her casually.

But at that moment, closeted together in the library, Madame seemed satisfied with my response. What remained for us to decide was how to begin our little venture.

“Have you made any notes or assembled any source materials as yet?” I asked, answering her question on how we should begin with a question of my own. She looked crestfallen when she heard me.

“I-I’m afraid I’ve done nothing, yet. I was hoping you would show me how to start.”

“Oh, I see.” I took a moment to stare into my hands. “Well, let’s start with an inventory of materials. How is your library organized? Is there a history section?”

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Madame stood and waved in the direction of the three walls. “I’m afraid not. Everything’s a bit scattered, I fear. My father never took the time to organize his possessions and I’ve been negligent, too, I’m afraid. I’m sure there are histories on every shelf in every corner of the room.”

When I realized the enormity of the task before us, my heart sank, although I endeavored to sound cheerful. “Then we must take stock of items shelf by shelf, organizing as we go along. Does that seem reasonable?”

“Yes.” My employer smiled at me. “That will keep you well occupied while I’m away.”

“Certainly, and before you leave, you might look among the papers your parents left you. A legal description of the property would be helpful. Do you have that?”

“I’m not certain where, at the moment.” A frown appeared on her porcelain forehead, again. “I’ll have to ask my attorney for a copy when I’m in Paris.”

“That would be a start. In the meantime, what about diaries? Did your family leave any that you can lay your hands on? That would be a help.”

The frown deepened. “Father told me a few anecdotes about the place, but I don’t think he wrote anything down...”

“What about your grandparents, then? Didn’t they leave any records?”

“My grandparents?” Madame’s eyes grew wide. “They had no connection with the chateau. It was a wedding gift from my father to my mother...though he was more enamored of the place than she was, I think.”

“Then, this isn’t a family estate?”

“Dear me, no. My mother’s parents were titled but there wasn’t any property. The money was on my father’s side. He was renovating the place when war broke out. Because of him, we have decent plumbing and lighting. He’d gotten that far, at least. My dear foolish father would probably have impoverished himself if it weren’t for Hitler. What you see is the dwelling as it was when my parents

occupied it. Nothing more's been done, except to maintain it. Mother took no interest in the buildings, and with no one to manage them...well..." Madame shrugged as if there was no need to finish the sentence.

"May I ask how your father made his living?"

"He was an investment banker. The war took away a good amount of our wealth, but not all. We inherited a bit from other branches of the family, those who were killed off in the violence. As to survivors, if any exist, my mother lost track of them. She was never any good at staying connected with the family once her parents died..."

Madame's eyes drifted toward the windows as her thoughts returned to the past. Then she pulled herself back to the present as if she were a leeward boat righting itself. "But you mustn't worry about finances," she said, as if reading my mind. "My father was very clever about that. Trusts were arranged in Swiss banks; that sort of thing. We shan't starve. Still, although the old girl has good bones, an estate of this size needs a lot of capital."

"Have you never thought of selling? That might be a solution."

Madame de Villiers threw back her head and emitted a light laugh. "I'm a romantic like my father. The thought never entered my head. Besides, it's the only home I've ever known. And what would become of Amelia or Mathiam? I couldn't sell the place out from under them."

"It might be difficult, as well, given its current condition."

"Oh, don't think I haven't had offers," she corrected me. "Of late, I've had several persistent ones, but I've rejected them. I have other plans."

"To make this a tourist destination?"

"You sound dubious. Does the idea strike you as foolish?"

"No, not at all. The area attracts tourists. The chateau's gardens alone would make it a destination."

"I was thinking about guests, actually. We have so many rooms."

"A bed and breakfast, you mean?"

"Yes, why not? We could refurbish a few spaces at first and build

from there. If the accommodations are comfortable, I should imagine people might like to stay at a historic chateau, even if it is a bit crumbly.”

“I’m sure they would. I love it here already.”

My employer looked at me from where she stood. “You give me such hope, Rachel. I know we can make a go of it.” Suddenly, she made a little twirl and clapped her hands. “Oh, I’m so happy, I could sing.”

I looked at her in surprise.

“Don’t worry.” She smiled. “I won’t subject you to my voice.”

We were sharing a laugh over her joke when Mrs. de Toi entered with morning coffee. The pot, the same one used at breakfast, had been refreshed with a darker, more aromatic blend than before. As I observed its heavy, silver ornamentation, it occurred to me that, if sold, the silver coffee set alone could fetch enough money to refurbish a room or two.

The housekeeper set the tray down on the small table near one of the leather chairs and poured the thick, black liquid into china cups.

“I suspect the pair of you need a break from all your work this morning. This coffee will perk you up.” She handed us each our drink as she spoke.

Madame, I noticed, took hers with a liberal lacing of cream and sugar. She took a sip and seemed to savor the experience. Then she shared our plans with the cook, who’d been standing with her arms crossed as if expecting a report.

“Rachel agrees we might make a go of a bed and breakfast at the chateau. And given your considerable talents in the kitchen, Mrs. de Toi, I suspect we’ll make our reputation with the cuisine, alone. Of course, we’ll have to solve the problem of reliable help; but we’ll work on that when we come to it. First, we must get our little piece written so tourists will come flocking to our door.”

“Don’t forget there’s the job of getting the grounds ready for fall planting. Mathiam needs a number of supplies. He’s given you a list. I trust you’ve had time to look at it?”

The crispness in the housekeeper’s voice led me to know that

although she was a servant in this establishment, hers was no ordinary relationship with her employer. In effect, she was the mother-in-residence.

Madame's guilty look assured me it was so. "Of course, you're right, Mrs. de Toi. I've no intention of ignoring Mathiam's needs. But I don't know where I've put the list. Perhaps you might ask him to give me another?"

"I will, if you promise not to lose it again? Maybe it would be best if you allowed him to order for himself. You know he won't be frivolous."

"No, of course, he won't. Tell him to go ahead, then. We can't have him short on supplies."

"Very good, Madame." The older woman left us with a smile on her lips.

Madame winked once we were alone again. "She won that round, didn't she? But then, she usually does."

That night, I went to bed especially happy. The day had fled by turning the hours into minutes. My employer and I had talked about refurbishing the rooms and, more importantly, we had laid out a plan for the development of our history. In the morning, I was to begin by making sense of the library.

Whether it was from a surfeit of wine at dinner or from the excess of conversation during the day, I don't know, but soon after I'd turned out my light that evening, I fell into a sleep which brought me the first of several vivid dreams that would occur over the course of my stay at the chateau.

What I recall, initially, is hearing music emanating from the hall below. I rise and make my way to the balcony over the stairs. There, I'm greeted by a scene of masked dancers, couples in formal wear, weaving in and out of the various rooms which are brightly lit. The women flash by as ribbons of color, their gowns twinkling with multicolored ornaments. The scene is mesmerizing and, as I stand above them in my flimsy nightgown, my mind fills with questions. Who are these people? What are they doing here? Madame de Villiers said nothing about a party.

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The moment my dream touches upon this point in reality, the music stops. The maskers look up. Discovered, I attempt to run away but am held back by a figure in a black cape whose face, like all the others, is hidden behind a mask. Instantly, I realize I am transformed. My hair no longer falls about my shoulders but is piled high upon my head and the gown I'm wearing is silk, the color of pomegranate. My hand reaches up to touch the glittering ruby necklace that hangs about my throat. Even without a mirror, I know I am beautiful.

The stranger and I descend the stairs while the dancers below break out into gloved applause. As we enter a great hall, the musicians strike up a waltz. Unimpeded, my partner and I begin to glide across the room and are soon followed by the rest of the party. The dancing figures cut elaborate circles around me, their eyes following my progress. I am troubled as I have no idea what their intense interest means.