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## Chapter One

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A patch of light glinted through the trees. She ran toward it to see if it was fire, but there was no smell of smoke, and then she could not see the light anywhere again. The Candover Valley lay wide open below her, the lines of soft farming land and old brick villages smudged by the early mist. A buzzard coasted on the wind that drove scudding clouds above the hills.

She had had the dream again. Ever since arriving from the Var, she'd been having it. She was in La Casaubade, and Robert was trying to open the door of her room. Suddenly he came in, all the light around him, and she was happy. But then she saw his angry expression and knew he was going to leave her. She had woken up shouting and with the yelping of the carpenter's dog had never properly got back to sleep.

At a sudden crack in the thicket hedge she startled; a pheasant lurched up, wings beating wildly, and swooped off above the clearing. She watched its clumsy flight and saw, above them all, another sky rise up, in which the sun burned and the mistral howled.

Turning rapidly, she walked down the hill through the clump of woods to the cottage. Soon she would not be watching and waiting anymore. With the months gone by, and no news from France, she must be out of danger, no longer an exile in the bush. She was an émigré, biding her time and

waiting for peace to settle in her home. On passing the last copse she stopped at the sight of the green, mosslike lawn—tended for centuries by salaried handwork and cold rains—and the low, timbered house with its gray thatch reaching almost to the ground. At the side the daffodils were blooming; she wished she could love them more. The crunch of a bicycle on the gravel roused her, and she went around the house.

“Morning, Mrs. Stevens. Just come back from your walk? Mr. Bacon says to tell you he’ll be late this morning.” The postman handed her a bunch of envelopes.

She smiled and took them in. Discarding bills and *The Independent*, she tore open a letter from her broker—the usual warning against long-term bonds—then, grabbing a paring knife, slit open the remaining envelope.

The Aphthorp, Apt. 11J  
Broadway and 79th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10024  
March 28

Ms. Margot Stevens  
Booker Cottage  
Upper Wield  
Hampshire, England

Dear Ms. Stevens:

I am writing in response to your advertisement in *The New York Review of Books* about a house for rent in the Var. I am a professor of history on sabbatical leave during the next academic year—unmarried, without children and pets—and do not anticipate visitors. I want to bring a lot of books: I have several projects and a craving for quiet and a splendid view.

Could you furnish me with further details and perhaps a few photographs?

I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Paul van Pein

A history professor, she mused, like Karol, her last—at forty-nine “gone down for the long count,” Robert had said.

He'd brought it on himself, probably: too many deadlines, too many all-nighters with double Armagnacs. Well, this lonely academic might do, might do nicely. She abhorred the thought of La Casaubade as a moratorium year for squabbling couples with scrambling children and carloads of friends coming up. Paul van Pein—a solitary academic. A penitent from those tense cloisters could very well serve.

As she absent-mindedly twisted the knife, her thoughts returned to La Casaubade, and the dismal picture came up again: walls crumbling, paint peeling, the windows and door-frames cracked by the wind. A proxy would have to be sent quickly to stave off the gray that was scumbling the lines in her mind. But surely her fears were unwarranted. She had been away for only a few months: dilapidation and ruin couldn't have settled in so quickly; on instinct Nicholas would be looking after things. In Hampshire, certainly, the damp could get into your bones but not there under the sun and scorching wind.

The ring of the telephone startled her, and the knife slid into her thumb. "Fuck!" She sucked her cut and lifted the receiver to deflect her anger.

"Hello."

"Daisy Holford speaking. Are you Margot Stevens? I'm so glad to have found you in. I am sorry not to have been in touch sooner, but I've been away. I knew, of course, you'd rented Booker Cottage. How odd that none of the Bookers wanted it. . . . Well, you must be feeling cut off—"

"No, Lady Holford, I'm not."

"Yes, you may say that. But please come to tea. Today. A few friends will be stopping by. It will be so good for you to meet them."

Since Margot's arrival in January, she had spoken to no one except the postman, the carpenter, and the gardener, and that was how she wanted it. The cottage had been rented for her by Karol's son, who had attended survival school with the younger Bookers. She knew county society, and she didn't want it, so it was with some surprise that she heard herself say, "I'd like to come."

She put the telephone back in the cradle. Whatever possessed me? I'm here to be alone, to keep to my circle.

On the deep green Mr. Bacon was on all fours, supposed to be clipping hedges. The smoothness of the lawn offended her—too different from the real thing: her scraggy gorse, jagged hills, and stony olive trees. It flattened the exhilaration she'd had on reading the letter. But solitude had taught her to leave such moods alone. Another would return—the mood of hope that grew on discipline.

The sky was darkening. She went into the garden, where the air had turned cool and foggy. The black soil cold between her fingers—knees damp, back aching—she planted seedlings for hours, row on row. The Candovers were purgatory, her work these past months redemptive. It had emptied her passions and hardened her will: she meant to be still firmer and more rigorous. Professor van Pein would have a letter from her that night. Only when the light began to fade, she stretched—stiff and cold—and went over to the gardener. "Be careful of your spine, Mr. Bacon," she said. "You ought to go home now."

In the bathtub, balancing a cup of whisky-laced tea, she considered her new prospect: she had had to leave La Casaubade, but she would not lose her place entirely. Now it would be someone else's to mind for her, but she would be right there beside him. He would be her eyes. Was it madness to identify her hideaway by sending a proxy? Robert could harass her in Hampshire if he wanted. But it was better to take the risk than go on living without news of him. Suddenly she laughed out loud, joyous. She had a plan. She would find out all about Robert and Catherine.

In the small bedroom with its timbers and slanting walls, she pulled on a leather skirt, high boots, and batik jacket and swept up her startling hair. But as the comb dug into a knot, she found herself combing through softer, darker curls, and hearing Catarina complain, "Don't," with a three-year-old's anguish, her eyes glassy with tears. That had been a lifetime ago: she had not often held her daughter since, and when Catarina had come to see her in France last summer, she had felt dismayed by how little connected them. She poured herself another whisky and threw on her cape.

How surprising the scene at the end of the room. After the cottage Holford House was lush. There were rich chintzes, dense Persian rugs, paintings of ancient Holfords in heavy

frames, ginger jars on dainty tables, roses, deep sofas, and polished chairs against which stood people—rich people—chatting easily, dressed in silks and tweeds, well-coiffed, well-mannered, well-fed, well-spoken. It was half a lifetime since she'd been in such a room. Her hesitation didn't come from the fear of seeming uninformed: she was attuned and responsive to patterned social intercourse, like those who are so good at languages or musical instruments it seems they do not even have to learn the new ones. Yet she felt the tremor of an older wariness.

A middle-aged woman approached, her waved hair wound in a velvet band. "I'm Daisy Holford, Mrs. Stevens. I'm so pleased you could come. Do have some tea and meet my husband. May I call you Margot? It's such a lovely name."

Margot shook hands with a man who seemed a little rougher than the others, with a thick crest of gray hair and bushy black eyebrows. He looked like a warden of the Geographical Society, and that made him familiar, but she was not sorry when he handed her a cup of tea and steered her toward the Reverend Fervour, who with a Miss Salient was invoking the fabled beauty of the cobalt mango. Like her, both had seen the jungles of Vanuatu.

Partly to deflect their curiosity, Margot asked about the county. With his beard and domed brow, the vicar looked like one of the James family, a congener of Henry, William, or Alice not mentioned in the biographies. "There are fine examples of the thatcher's art in the villages," he said, "each pattern bearing the signature of the individual artisan. The porcelain cats crouching on the roofs are a reminder of the days when the house cat guarded the thatch from crows. But now the job is done by a carefully molded net casing." Margot felt something stir—the pleasure she took in accurate information. "Yes," said the vicar, smiling, "we've been Thatcherites for centuries here." She stared at him; he took a step back and said in a loud voice: "And you, Mrs. Stevens, where do you hail from originally?"

"From Boston, but the last few years I've been living in the South of France."

"How lucky you are," said Daisy Holford, coming up to her. "I have dear friends in Cannes."

"I rarely go to Cannes," said Margot. Margot abominated Cannes. "I live in the Var, in the first range of mountains in from the coast. It's too windy there for most tourists. The seasons are harsh, and the landscape is too stark."

"There I must disagree with you," said Robert Holford, looking intently at her. "I often hiked through the Gorges du Verdon as a young man. It's true the country is austere, even dangerous, but I found it invigorating."

She took a step directly into his gaze; she knew her eyes had turned a brilliant blue. "Yes," she said, "I know the hardness—but it can be excessive. I went to the Gorges to watch the eagles and stood in the middle of the bridge, thinking that if I allowed myself to lose concentration for a second, they would plunge down on me."

"My dear Margot," said her hostess, "whatever made you leave in the winter, leave all that sun behind?"

"Oh, just the feeling that it was time to go. I am lending the house to a friend." She smiled and moved across the room past a large mahogany trolley, heavy with silver and embroidery and rich food. She was drawn to the darkly varnished picture that hung above it: a woman in a torn dress, apparently of fur or hide, lay back in distress across a rock, her hair splayed out, while a shape in the corner—a large owlish head—peered harshly through the trees at her. In the foreground stood a fanciful palace or fortress. She squinted at the bottom to discover a legend: the picture wanted a moral motto, but she could not find one.

"You're a sight for a famished eye." The compliment came *sotto voce* from her left elbow. She turned and saw a florid, good-looking man in a too-tight jacket. "You mean the eager poacher," she said, handing him her cup and sandwich as she turned away.

"Wait a minute. That's a bit strong."

Margot shook his hand away and said quietly, with a smile, "Because I am strong," and then went to pay her respects to Robert Holford.

It was unlikely she would be harmed. She would be distracted, but she would not be got at. There had been rapidly murmured invitations from the vicar, from Miss Salient, and

from the amorous Bramson-Pyne, of course. On the way out she had met Mrs. Bramson-Pyne, red-haired like her and still pretty, but worn with worry about her adolescent girls. She had asked Margot's advice and Margot had said: "Oh, leave them to themselves." So she had made a mark, with allusions to her traveled past and pseudoconfidences, but these were no longer overtures to another game. Repeated many times and rarely challenged, they'd become an empty ritual. And what to do about Morton Bramson-Pyne when the time came? Easy—that was his lookout. The point was dignity now and its element plain: solitude.

She was at the cottage, and as she saw its low silhouette, she felt that she could call up despair and it would come, but she would not do it. And after all, what could be easier to resist? There was a task at hand.

April 3

Dear Professor van Pein:

I was glad to receive your letter. I have always imagined that La Casaubade would be conducive to work of an academic nature.

The house is located in the hills to the north-west of Seillans. If you consult a good map, you will find it off the road connecting Draguignan and Grasse. La Casaubade is on a hill-top, commanding a view—you dreamt of one—which extends more than half-circle over vineyards, forests, and mountains. When the mistral is blowing, you can imagine you see the ocean to the south.

The property consists of three *berges*—terraces dug out to facilitate the cultivation of olive trees. There are as many figs and young apricots as olives now, which have been hard hit by a blight from Italy.

At the bottom of the *berges* are dense bushes full of blackberries and a fair amount of wild raspberries and asparagus. A small stony stream flows past them.

The house has a vegetable garden which you may want to keep up—there are two harvests a year, and the yield is abundant, but you will have to work hard. The walls of the house were once part of an eighteenth-century *mas* (farmhouse). Several years ago, I redesigned the interior.

On the first floor is the living room, with a ceiling three stories high. The room has a large fireplace (there is ample wood for burning on the property), three double doors facing south, and a small window to the east. The floors are terra-cotta tile with Moroccan carpets. There are also wicker armchairs, woven by local craftsmen, oak tables with brass inlay, a leather sofa, and an old Zanzibar chest.

On the west side of the room is a plain refectory table and chairs: this is the dining room. Next to it is the kitchen—large and modern—with ash counters and cabinets, gas stove, refrigerator, and freezer.

From the kitchen, a winding stone staircase takes you past a landing to a study-cum-bedroom with a double bed, large desk and armchair, an old armoire, a chest, and Afghan carpet.

The staircase goes on up to the third floor. Here the ceilings are much lower and slope. The bedroom has a long window looking out over the the living room below. The bathroom, large and sunny, faces the valley to the west.

An addition stands in the back. It contains a workroom, with washing machine—the mistral will be your drier—and a storage room for gardening tools and machinery.

I hope you decide to take the house. It will give you good value, and the space now wants to be lived in.

Sincerely,  
Margot Stevens.

She dozed into the raw sun and the purple heady air of the hills—hills full of rough, grayish grass, sage and spiky rosemary, brambles and gnarled pine trees, hills crazy from the sun and the wind.

She went to bed, dreamt, and woke.

She saw:

the jungle (heat bees sawtoothed plants mud);

felt:

the month of nights strike into her stomach like a fist;

heard:

the sneaky pad of naked feet nearing her hut and her heart racing.

She never knew if one of them would come or which one of them would come. Later there would be no recognitions, only dark faces that were darker in the night—and no words



uttered, only odd murmurs, clicks, and stranger cries. At the best of times she felt a sense of familiarity, felt release, but then as the weeks passed, disgust blotted out everything but wanting still to feel their bodies strain against her in the endless dark.

On the margins of her consciousness, however, her curiosity had gone on working, because it was also a matter of pride to grasp the code that governed the order of uses—the order she'd penetrated by letting herself be used. Her curiosity saved her for a while, and then under the circumstances it seemed grotesque to think that what was at stake was thick description.

She ran away from Vanuatu. Years later, she found the ruin called La Casaubade and built it up, and on her hill in France lived well, yes, when she lived alone. But Robert had been there, and when she went back to him, she tried to think his thoughts, and that had not worked out at all.

How reckless to have wanted more, to have wanted him. And then to have taken up with Catherine! She'd talked too much to her, and their one embrace had been a gesture—theatrical, extravagant—above all, unnecessary. No, Robert could look her up in Hampshire if he wanted, but she would not go out to meet him—not until she had first turned things around. The news might be disastrous, but at least it would revoke the finality of their parting.

It had happened last fall.

The sky was turning bleak as she waited on the terrace, listening for the noise of his Mercedes bouncing up the hill. They would have the battle she had been expecting for days. But she was brushed by a wing of fear when she saw his face. He was coming up, in black sweater and black trousers, harsh as a crow against the rocks, his hands stiff against his sides.

"Where is she?"

Margot was silent.

"What did you do to her?"

"Don't start that way. I can't stand you that way. I haven't seen her for days."

"Don't lie." He took a step forward. "Just tell me what you did to her."

"I didn't do anything."

"Right. You didn't do anything, because she's nothing, except someone you use in your plots. Like Catarina."

She had to smash the look of hatred off his face. She drew her hand back and let it fly with all her strength and hit him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She reached out to take his arm. "Robert, I don't understand. What's happened to Catherine?"

He was staring up at the house, holding his cheek. He turned and looked at her: "I don't know you."

"Don't say that." She began to cry, furious at crying.

"Your hands have been all over her. You're too free with your hands." He whispered, "Something terrible has happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"She might have killed herself."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"You've seen her body?"

"How dare you ask me such a question?"

"How dare you withhold information? What does that mean, 'she might have killed herself'?"

Robert said, "She left me a letter, and now she's gone."

"And that proves it."

"I tell you, this time you're not going to get away with it."

"I suppose you had nothing to do with it. You should never have started anything with her."

"You made her do it because I wanted her."

"What did she write? Tell me her words, her actual words!" She was close to wailing, there on top of her sacred hill. But in the middle of the disgrace she'd stopped to look at him: he was exhausted, and for a second she wanted to hold on to him as he'd held her when the terror had struck. But he turned on his heel and walked down to the car. And she got scared. You thought you had a life and then suddenly it was smashed, and there were openings that could be walked into by anything and anyone. But now . . . there was a good thought stirring. Oh yes, this tenant, this little tenant, could be the means. Would be her proxy in this too. She clenched her fists, rolled onto her belly, and fell asleep.