



# I

I AUGUST 1914

I loathed the man I was to marry today.

A hand reached across and covered my wrist; it was hairless with blunt, well-kept fingernails.

‘Be still, Fleurette.’ I hadn’t realised how I was fidgeting. ‘Collect yourself,’ my brother continued. ‘Father would want you composed, representing the family so publicly.’ Henri tipped my chin through the veil which, though sheer, likely hid me enough to blur my expression of anguish.

Henri’s purposeful mention of our genial father demanded I obey. I was nothing if not dutiful. They say we all make choices in our lives, but I was born into a family who made nearly all of life’s choices for me. In their defence I had little to complain about. I was the precious daughter to be cherished and admired like treasure.

I had failed to comprehend until recently, however, that this was not simply a charming notion. I was indeed the family treasure and I could be exchanged like a coin, traded as human currency. I was as helpless as a glinting gold sovereign passed from one hand to another: a bargain made, a transaction secured.

And now with the deal done – and just the ritual required to

confirm its existence to everyone else – my angst counted for naught. I made another attempt to take the legal position, my last bastion, the only aspect of this vile union I could attempt to hide behind. The war, it seemed, might be my ally.

‘Henri, in the eyes of the law, we shall be unmarried. Without that certificate from the mayor, the priest can’t legally wed us.’ I spoke the truth.

‘Don’t start that again, little sister. I can assure you that the mayor and his councillors have far more on their minds than a society wedding. I have personally pressed the point an hour ago and not even our name and its weight – or Aimery’s or my threats, I might add – can convince his assistant to interrupt the town’s war meetings. Besides, the mayor and his adjoint aren’t even in Grasse,’ he said, sounding exasperated because he knew I was aware of this last fact.

True. We were supposed to have had our civil ceremony yesterday but with France on a war footing, awaiting declaration, no town hall anywhere in the country would have been inclined to concern itself with legalising a marriage, not even one for an elite pair of families such as ours.

‘When is the mayor back?’

He lifted a shoulder helplessly. ‘Tomorrow, hopefully. The emergency meeting in Nice at the prefecture will likely close today when declaration of war is surely formalised.’

‘Can’t anyone else —’

‘No,’ he snapped. ‘It is unbecoming that a lower representative would wish to perform a marriage ceremony today with the nation in such flux – even if he were in a position to or permitted to.’ I wanted to leap in and press my point here but Henri was ready for me. ‘Now,’ he continued, cutting the air with a raised palm. ‘Enough. It has been hard enough to convince the priest to go ahead but if he has acquiesced, then I suspect you have no higher authority.’

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'I have my moral —'

'Let it be, Fleurette,' he sniped, brushing imaginary lint from his trousers. 'We are toppling into war with Germany! These are hardly usual circumstances. Heaven will forgive you – it's just a formality, and it's not as though we won't be having the civil ceremony.'

'When?'

'The mayor has sent word that he will do his best for us – let's hope tomorrow.' He was flushed pink with simmering anger and I watched him run a finger between his collar and neck, grimacing with displeasure at me. 'Now, neither I nor the De Lasset family will ever forgive you if you get in the way of this important union. We can hardly cancel after months of preparation. This town needs this marriage. Plus our mobilisation orders will be through at any moment – let's at least get the church wedding completed. The civil duties can be sorted quietly. I know it's backwards – *I know* – but I need you to tolerate the discrepancy. If our church can, you can. Please think of everyone else . . . anyone else, in fact, instead of yourself for once.'

The rebuke hurt. I was not selfish but I was angry with our priest for bending the rules of our faith, the laws of our land, simply because the wealthiest families demanded it. No doubt Henri or my equally boorish husband-to-be had coerced the priest – the new window for the apse, perhaps?

'Henri, I will be lying with a man who is not legally my husband,' I bleated.

'Not in the eyes of the law, no, but it shall be fixed. What are you hoping for? That we shall cancel because of a piece of paper?' He glared at me. 'Are you going to disappoint the entire town, all of its people gathered to celebrate what is arguably the most important marriage in recent times, perhaps ever, for Grasse? Two of its elite families, formally unified: it's the dream, Fleurette. Don't spoil

this dream, this optimism, given that every able man here is about to march off to do his country's duty.'

'Exactly! How can we be sure of the legal paperwork being achieved without Aimery's presence?'

I suspected he had no ready answer – this was my final flag, my last standing post. I was shocked that he was more than ready for me, though, with a voice filled with disdain.

'The declaration will be chest-beating by Germany. We have to observe our mobilisation duties but I suspect we shall all be making our way back to our homes within a week, perhaps two at worst. It will be short-lived and Aimery will be home, but for now he wants to leave Grasse as a married man, potentially with an heir already seeded, and you are going to ensure you live up to everyone's expectations. That's your duty.'

I closed my eyes in revulsion. Now my body was being spoken about like a field, ready to be turned over and . . . oh, it was too ugly to contemplate.

There was no response to my brother's tirade. I was struck mute; I opened my eyes to stare at my gloved hands and the small mound beneath the glove of my left hand, third finger. The glint of crimson winked at me. It was a half-carat ruby set between curves of old mine-cut and rose-cut diamonds. The result was a ring shaped like an eye . . . and it stared back at me from under the lace with accusation in that red eye. Aimery could not engage me for marriage with an heirloom ring; he had nothing of his mother's and I suspected he would have ignored something of hers even if he had it to give. Instead, this had been designed at enormous expense in Paris, but without my involvement, of course. And so it reflected only Aimery . . . flamboyant, no doubt outrageously expensive, ostentatious in its bright colouring – demanding attention. The shape was odd and I already imbued it with a sinister sense that it would always spy on me. I hated it, but

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then everything about this marriage carried despair for me.

An odd pain enveloped me in the claustrophobic carriage, sharp and nauseating. It was the height of summer and the flowers in my hand and threaded through my hair might wilt; that was the reason given for us not travelling in an open landau. Churlishly, I decided the real reason was more likely Henri's concern for his hair and the carefully applied pomade. The pain deepened; perhaps I was panicking, like the time I thought Felix had chopped his fingers off with a lavender scythe, or the morning of the June picnic when I fell from my horse and everyone's voices were coming from too far away . . . or the day my mother died, which in itself was beyond my comprehension as an infant, yet as young as I was I recall my father's body sagging like an empty sack of rose petals and not understanding why.

I was not prone to being flighty and in my defence those memories belonged to isolated, intensive events that I could conjure authentically. Today's anxiety didn't feel as though it would pass, or that someone would come along to make it feel better; today was the start of a new life I feared. The desire to shrink from it was sufficiently overwhelming that I felt as though I was trying to tear part of myself free . . . me and myself needed to separate in order to get through what duty now required of me.

I looked away from the stone dwellings of the town as we picked our way through the streets, drawing ever closer to the sound of the single cathedral bell chiming our imminent arrival. My gaze fixed on my hands in my lap, which were finally still. The fingers beneath the pearl-studded silken Chantilly lace were straight, unblemished by any hereditary disease like my father had suffered. I tried to pretend the internal ache was coming from their joints, pathetically I suppose, trying to commune with my dead father in a moment when I had never needed him more.

I privately wished Henri the pain of our father in his own

fingers. Perhaps he sensed the curse pass between us as I remembered the physician's description of Father's arthritis. My recall of any event was so reliable I could watch the scene, hear the words accurately replay in my mind.

'Your joints are building their spurs,' Dr Bertrand had observed, puffing on a pipe as he bent to inspect my father's hands, despite his host's muttered protest. 'They're called Heberden's nodes, if you prefer me to be precise,' he said, frowning. Bluish smoke had escaped his lips and moved like a phantom, stealing around the room, scenting it with top notes of the whiskey I smelled in my father's decanter and the dry leaves I threw on the campfire that my brother and I set the previous winter. I reached hard and could still conjure the taste of tea and a gentle hum of what I thought might be vanilla. Father would have waved a finger in appreciation at my observation.

Ah, those crooked hands; they had taught me everything from how to ride a horse to how to pluck a tiny, delicate flower at dawn without touching the fragile bloom, a necessary ability in our family business. The only skill I could think of in this tense moment in the carriage of misery with Henri was that the only talent my father's hands had not physically taught me was gifted through his blood. I had known even then, as a beribboned child with a black kitten making a nest in my lap while Dr Bertrand mused over my father's arthritic fingers, that my heightened sense of taste and smell was emerging in tandem with my twin brother's equally strong talent.

Our elder brother Henri had known too that, once again, he was different to his siblings. And he could not cheerfully regard this talent we'd acquired as a blessing; even now it sat between us as an invisible presence, taunting him despite its silence. Henri had learned how to ignore it but never to disguise the impact it had on his constant desire to impress our father.

The Delacroix twins had 'the Nose'. The divinely bestowed

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gift of olfactory superiority allowed us such a heightened sense of smell we could distinguish aromas beyond the average person. Thus our ability to develop complex fragrances with depth and skill made us gods of our industry. Except I had the misfortune, I suppose, to be born a woman. Had I arrived into any other family, I suspect my prowess would have lain dormant. As it was, only Felix was taken seriously as the upcoming perfumer of the family but I was permitted to contribute my thoughts as a sort of invisible consultant to Felix and my father. It was enough – it had to be, for I had no choice in this. However, more obvious than my passion to use my skills was that the inherent ability had bypassed the heir, and so Henri found creative ways to punish us for this fact. I realise now that most of the time even poor Henri wasn't aware of just how deeply angry he was to lack this highly prized skill.

It was unusual for two such closely related family members to possess the flair that for most felt unattainable. Oh, indeed, recognising bouquets was a skill that could be acquired with a workmanlike diligence. No, what I'm referring to is a sixth sense. An inherent aptitude for deciphering dozens – no, scores – of elemental tastes and smells, even when jumbled together. As a youngster Henri's wrath tried to trip us up; he'd blindfold us, demand we perform like circus animals. What he couldn't realise was that denying us the sight of the source only heightened our proficiency. If he'd paid more attention, he would have recalled that whenever Father smelled a perfume, or even a single flower, he would close his eyes as if to be deliberately blindfolded from any visual cues.

I couldn't touch this exquisite pain I was feeling in my fingers now. I couldn't soothe it, or send it away. I had no idea from where it emanated: my departing soul, I thought, and I knew Felix would scoff at the dramatic notion.

I would give anything for my father's gnarled hands to reach out and hold mine now; he would know what to say, would know

how to quell the pain. He would cancel this pantomime and counsel all involved that he wished a happy rather than a dutiful marriage for his only daughter. He had never favoured Aimery for me, wouldn't hear of it when it was first proffered several years back. In fact his horror had matched mine. I'd had a reliable ally until now; why hadn't he stated in his will that I should marry whom I wanted and not have my marriage arranged? My mother, rest her soul, might not agree. She herself had been forced into a union of duty demanded of her aristocratic English family. Fortunately for Flora St John, the man on the other end of that bargain was Arnaud Delacroix. I doubted she could regret her family's agreement, hammered out in Paris, as I understood it, between the two heads of the household, for it had been a wise and – luckily for her – a blessed one. Although no one could have known that, surely, at the time. The agreement would have been made purely on the suitability of his and her families' combined financial clout. I wish I'd known my mother longer than two brief years and could ask her now how it had felt to be sold on.

I gathered from others in the household that she had been a golden-haired beauty with a milky complexion and pale eyes and was treated like a goddess by my father. She roamed my memory more as a line-up of senses. I could recreate her preferred fragrance simply by closing my mind and thinking on it: honeysuckle, jasmine and rose would linger in my thoughts. I could dimly recall the sound of her gentle voice; I could also latch on to a memory of her hugs and kisses, but her physical presence was not easy to conjure. She was like a ghost who drifted through our house in photographs or the portrait in my father's salon; she was real only through her possessions – jewellery, clothes, her ivory comb and hairbrush – but I couldn't miss her because I didn't know her. We lost this fragile woman to complications from her pregnancy when we twins were just over two years old.

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My parents' life together was short but I am constantly, almost deliberately, assured by others that it was filled with affection. She had loved him completely, according to our old nurse, who was like a mother to mine and a grandmother to me. She told me how Flora St John had wanted to run down the same church aisle I was approaching in her hurry to become a Delacroix of Grasse. The name counted for so much, not just in the south-west but in all of France and England too, and now I was giving up that fine name for an even more powerful one.

Except I did not want it.

The person who did desire it for me cast a look of smug pleasure my way as we rounded the corner to crest the incline to where my future beckoned. 'I think the whole town has turned out,' he remarked in an airy tone, tapping my hand in a proprietorial way. 'You should feel honoured. Look how happy they all are for you, for us.'

'Father would not approve of your decision,' I said, finding the courage to throw down one final challenge. 'And you know it. It was discussed years ago and he told you then he would not sanction it.'

Henri looked back to the adoring townsfolk, cheering and clapping as we passed. I recognised many of them. I should have been smiling, waving to them. I did neither.

'His last breath was about wishing he'd seen you in your wedding finery.'

'He'd approve of my gown, Henri, but not of the person you're forcing me to wear it for. It's not that he didn't like Aimery; even you must know he behaved oddly around him, as though there was something about him that made Father's hair stand on end. I can be specific, though – I don't like Aimery.'

It was stale debate. Henri did not trouble himself to argue it again. Instead he sighed at me as one might an insolent youngster. 'You will marry Aimery De Lasset today because it is an excellent match for our family.'

‘For you,’ I whipped back, living up to the label of a petulant child.

‘As head of this family I am tasked to make the decisions,’ he said in a voice leaden with forced patience. I could tell Henri was schooling himself not to be baited today.

‘As eldest by a mere five years,’ I said, feeling a pathetic glimmer of victory at qualifying his status, ‘you may have the power to make decisions, Henri, but it doesn’t capacitate you to make good ones, as you are ably demonstrating today. It’s simply an easy one – solves a problem in your mind that doesn’t exist in reality. If you would only wait, I would help you to make a brilliant decision on this matter and a prosperous one too. Trust me, Henri, I know my role. This is the wrong choice and definitely the wrong time.’

His irritating smile widened indulgently. ‘I’m sorry you feel this way on your wedding day, Fleurette, because frankly I believe twenty-three is an ideal age for marriage. Who knows when you might decide the perfect lifetime partner has walked into your life? No, little sister, we shall not wait for an emotional readiness of your choosing that could be years away and thus miss the chance at this union of our two houses. Between us I think our father indulged you too much; his zealous refusal to consider a marriage between a Delacroix and a De Lasset bordered on fanaticism.’

‘Do you think our father was mad, Aimery?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’re twisting my words.’

‘In that case, you’re saying he possessed a genuine and fundamental objection to our houses joined in blood.’

‘I never understood it and he never bothered to explain it. We all know the bitter rivalry of the past but as both fathers got older their blood cooled, plus of course they were both so successful there was no need to keep fighting one another. Until you grew up there was no reason to discuss marriage, and I’ll admit I remain perplexed as to why our father didn’t feel inclined to pledge you to

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De Lasset, if just to keep our perfume empires strong, but he always did indulge you. Nevertheless, he's not here now and he's not the one looking to the future of our family, whereas I am, and I do not share his views. I have no reservations for this union because it makes every bit of sense to me. Furthermore, neither Aimery nor I am prepared to wait any longer. You're in your prime now; you will never look more beautiful, your skin will never glow as much, your body will never feel or move the way it does now.'

My value was now being reduced to the youth of my flesh and I wanted to accuse him of having no knowledge of my prime – or any other potential bride's prime, come to that – but he lectured on, trampling my thoughts.

'Be grateful for your charmed life, Fleurette. You belong to the second-wealthiest family of Grasse and your marriage into the town's richest family is surely a rite of passage; the timing is perfect and you know it ensures strength for the town as well – the whole region, in fact.'

He was so transparent with his manipulation I felt a momentary pity. Henri had always lacked subtlety. It was only I suppose in the last year or two that I'd come to understand Henri so fully, with his odd sense of inferiority. He had so much in his favour simply by being the eldest – that special status of being entitled – but still he envied his siblings, hungered for what we had.

If my father treated us all with what felt like identical affection I suspect my mother held a special and deeply embedded compassion for Henri. I gathered this from the old nursery maid who helped raise us. Henri was Flora's firstborn; the celebrated arrival of a son and heir made him her most beloved. It also helped, I'm sure, that he echoed her family with hair the colour of the sunbaked beaches of our childhood. He must have looked like a little angel as an infant; the grainy photos attested to this. Now, though, that once shiny hair

was thinning and looked less like straw and more like wispy gold thread. His hairline had receded to reveal wings of shiny scalp that made his forehead seem a little too large. He compensated with a wiry moustache, ostentatiously curled so its tips flew north. And a newly grown beard offered the added benefit of making him seem older – the air of the patriarch he was aiming for. He trimmed his gingery beard to a point, like an exclamation to end a debate and prove he was, at twenty-seven, virile and capable of growing hair.

Meanwhile, Felix and I were the antithesis of Henri; we were a pair of midnight sentinels to his once angelic gold. Our fluff of infancy darkened quickly and by five we sported the lustrous near-black hair of our father's ancestors and we knew we would turn first moonlight silver before we became white as our predecessors, while Henri continued the march into bland baldness. The dissimilarities continued. Where Henri was slightly built with sloping shoulders hidden by skilled tailoring, our brother was strapping and I too was long-limbed, wide of shoulder, and both of us glowingly healthy to Henri's somewhat wan appearance. He routinely took 'herbal inhalations', gargled with salt, had taken to the waters at Lourdes for several years in an annual pilgrimage . . . anything to keep the feared infection at bay. He sniffed eucalypt and had rubdowns of tonic of menthol as he worried incessantly that he might contract the same disease as our mother. He would often ungraciously claim that she'd bestowed weak lungs upon him. Perhaps if he gave up smoking his expensive cigars from Cuba, it might help . . . but who was I to question our family's head any longer? Soon he would no longer be head of my family. I would belong to another man, another head of household, another controlling son who strived to live up to his ancestors.

*Another bully.*

The horses drawing our carriage slowed and paced out a wide circle on the cobbles sprawling in front of the cathedral before we

finally lurched to a halt. We'd arrived at the place where one half of me would likely give up on life. The other half would bear witness to that surrender but hopefully remain safe, hidden, alive and dreaming of better luck for us both.

'Marriage, family, duty is everything our father stood for,' Henri finished, as though wanting to slam the book shut on any further discussion about the suitability of this marriage.

I insisted on aiming to have the last word, though. 'Well, as you're selling me off like a stud horse, Henri, you really should take into account my fine teeth!' I said, my voice finally breaking as my body felt itself sundered. It seemed as though only a shell now remained inside the carriage, dabbing quickly at her eyes, while the spirit version of me shrank and surely floated outside, finally free, to await on the church steps for the Delacroix bride to emerge from the froth of white inside the closed carriage.

'Do your duty,' Henri urged in a clipped tone. I watched his face betray the sneer that was close to the surface. Henri had no time for girlish tears. 'A wise and solid marriage is the only contribution demanded of you . . . that, and some heirs. You can manage that, surely?'

'Duty?' I heard my voice squeak on the word. 'Henri, we're potentially going to war and you're more troubled by a strategic marriage arrangement and —'

He made a condescending tutting sound. 'Hush now, Fleurette. It is not your place to discuss politics.' I could almost see myself blinking in disgust opposite him. 'Besides' – he smirked – 'this is why young women should not focus on men's business. You may claim otherwise, Fleurette, but you are as emotionally vulnerable as the next girl. Let me remind you of the shared blood that runs in the veins of the German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar. They are hardly going to prolong any bad feeling against each other. War may well be declared . . . yes, words, but it likely won't amount to much fighting.'

I couldn't be bothered arguing otherwise. Henri's tactless hint at the next duty of horror I would be required to perform was suddenly crowding me, smacking in my mind as one might swing at a fly with a swat. He was not a deliberately cruel man but I could almost hear the snapping sound in my thoughts, almost feel the sting of his taunt.

And I replied in a similarly cruel vein, although I was ashamed of myself for stooping this low. '*You* should marry him, Henri. You've always had a fondness for Aimery.'

His glare was ringed by invisible rage. I could feel it wanting to reach out and grab me by the neck as he used to when we were little and he was up against both of us. Because Felix was bigger, stronger, Henri picked on me instead, even if he wanted to fight back against only my brother. I was never a match physically but Felix had schooled me in how to use my wit instead. But I had failed him today. Today my tongue was a blunt instrument, clubbing Henri with the only weapon I had against him.

His secret had always been safe with us. We were brothers and sister. No matter our differences, we shared the name of Delacroix and nothing stood between that and the rest of the world. Except now. Now the brother I had protected was casting me adrift into a new world I did not want . . . not yet.

I was his chattel. In that moment I hated him as much as Aimery and if not for Felix's sympathetic grin from the top of the cathedral stairs as he spotted our arrival, I may have faltered. But the glance from Felix told me to bear up. I looked at the male version of me; we had shared our mother's womb during the same thirty-nine weeks, emerging within a minute of each other. I was born first and took regular delight in reminding him of this. Everything was shared, often our emotions – especially today – and I knew he was losing his best friend in a way that most couldn't understand and everyone would underestimate.

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'I will forgive you for that insult, Fleurette, though I'm sure I don't know what you mean by it,' he lied. 'Catherine also would not appreciate your sentiment.'

I might have liked Catherine in any other situation and I would be a welcoming sister to her if she married Henri. However, her family's driving need for her to be a Delacroix at all costs was surely out-muscling her instincts. If only she'd met Aimery first and they could have married, then I wouldn't be facing my trauma; maybe I could blame poor Catherine for this dark pathway I now had to walk?

'Fleurette?' His tone this time was surprisingly gentle.

Yet I responded as if he'd hit me. 'Yes!' I clenched two fists in my lap in a bid to contain my fury. 'I know, Henri, I know . . .' I gave one last sniff. 'Let me gather myself.'

'I want to say something meaningful to you.'

'Don't,' I warned. People were hushing around the carriage, and the coachman was waiting as a footman put down a stool for me to step onto.

Henri held the door closed a few moments longer.

'Make it work, little sister. This is a match unrivalled in our family history . . . or theirs. It is one made in heaven.'

'Or rather one on paper, using arithmetic with a lot of French franc symbols.'

'Fleurette, you are a beautiful, young woman with an intelligence to match. Learn how to use those gifts amongst the others that have been bestowed upon you to get what you want.'

The words drove into me like the chilling blast of the mistral blowing ferociously in November, roaring through my mind, taking with them my haughty resentment and perhaps even the arrogance that I should have the right to choose the man I marry. It was not so for any of my friends. Why should I be different? I was a romantic fool. Felix regularly accused me of wanting to script my life when it

would be controlled by seniors, or take its own merry path and would likely throw up obstacles to clamber over, or throw down challenges to fight through. A slit of comprehension opened for me like a shaft of dawn's sunlight breaking over the hills of Grasse.

Henri's revolting choice for me would indeed ensure the success and wealth of ongoing generations. 'Keep it in the family of Grasse' had been one of my father's favourite phrases and no doubt that philosophy was one he had wanted to apply to our unions. I couldn't be selective about when his advice was relevant. It never stopped being relevant. Protecting the industry of Grasse, protecting the family's interests and its ongoing success, was my job too, and part of my job was to marry strategically.

Love was irrelevant – a lucky by-product, if it occurred.

'We have to go, Fleurette,' Henri said, and his tone was even kinder.

The door to the carriage was opened and the sounds of the people who lined the courtyard and some of the narrower alleys that fed into the cathedral square hurried in. Henri stepped out first to applause that turned wild as I emerged to take his hand with as much grace as I could muster.

'You have never looked more gorgeous,' he whispered. 'If I were Aimery, I would consider myself the luckiest man on earth.'

I looked into his earnest expression and saw no guile. Poor Henri. He truly believed this was for the best. In which case, I should do the same. Accept my lot now and get on with it. I could hardly complain that I wanted for much.

I braced, took a slow, deep breath and found a smile for my brother. 'Walk me down the aisle, Henri.'

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Women sighed, thrilled at the sight of the first Delacroix bride of the new generation to step out, ready to take her wedding vows at the

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cathedral of Notre-Dame du Puy. Others, mainly boys, hung from windows, whistling and vying for my attention – a little smile, a side-ways glance, perhaps. I gave nothing but hoped they'd all forgive me, imagine me a nervous bride, desperate not to trip or stumble. I began to understand, feeling their collective surge of pleasure. How impossible it must have seemed to my brother and his partner in this transaction, to consider cancellation or postponement.

These might be the last smiles for a long time and although war had yet to be officially declared and we prayed it might still be averted, I think we could all feel its press. This wedding was needed to keep everyone optimistic for the future.

Henri and Aimery had forgone the age-old tradition of the man calling at the house of his bride and then walking with her to the church, gathering a long procession of townsfolk behind them. Henri considered it beneath us and it troubled me that he saw us as different from the townsfolk in anything but privilege. Each of us children had been born and raised in this town and our father had come here from Paris as a boy. We were locals. Perhaps the word Henri didn't utter but heard in his mind was 'peasants'. Either way, I had to forgo what might have been the only fun of the day for me, to walk with the people I loved and perhaps channel their joy into mine. It seemed they'd all proceeded to the church anyway, just without the main couple.

I noted their sense of celebration had not been dampened and they were determined I still follow some of the ritual. Each stair to the cathedral was flanked by two children who belonged to the workers of our fields – I knew each by name. Between each pair they'd stretched a white ribbon. Normally, I would have been required to cut those ribbons intermittently on my journey from my home to the altar, but they seemed happy enough to make me cut the ribbons on the stairs. The first boy, Pierre, son of one of the violet growers, solemnly handed me some tailor's scissors that

looked cumbersome in his small hands.

‘Mademoiselle Fleurette,’ he said, bowing sweetly.

I could hardly refuse. ‘*Merci, Pierre,*’ I whispered, touching his curly head, before I cut his ribbon and the crowd cheered.

I lifted the hem of my gown, which was made of transparent embroidered silk covering the palest ecru satin. The elbow-length, gently ruffled sleeves of sheer Flanders lace had been fashioned from my grandmother’s bridal gown. We were a superstitious lot, we Delacroix. The overall colour effect seemed to match the marble of the shallow exterior stairs of the cathedral we were ascending, and I wondered how many happy brides – like my mother – had wanted to run up this short flight towards their intended. I had walked these smoothly worn stairs most Sundays of my life and never dreaded them as I did now. From within the womb of the cathedral’s stone walls I could hear the echoing sounds of people restless in their pews – coughs and the drone of men’s voices, the light laughter of women – before the organ’s soft background hum became louder, turned into official wedding music, and hushed those tones.

The pain had left me. I was no longer whole, though. I genuinely believed in this moment that part of me had escaped and now observed my other. I reminded myself that when Henri let go of my arm, my twin would be standing alongside the groom to keep me strong, get me through the trial of agreeing to be Aimery’s wife without shouting my true feelings. Felix had already disappeared into the cathedral, no doubt quieting anyone who hadn’t realised I’d arrived at the gateway to misery. I imagined his crooked smile with that glint of mischief in his eye, urging me to be strong.

The thought encouraged me and I turned once, reaching deep to find a glimmer of a smile for the still applauding townsfolk outside. They loved the old families, loved what we did for the town; they especially loved my father for how he looked after everyone who worked for the firm of Delacroix. It didn’t matter whether they

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picked the flowers, worked on the factory floor in the distillation process or drove the carts that would make deliveries – they were all viewed as vital, valuable and worthy of his smile, his care, his kindness at all times.

We were the European chieftains of this industry. We were the royalty of Grasse, beloved old families of France.

We are the Perfumers to the World.

Perhaps it was this thought that warmed up my expression as I turned to lift a hand of appreciation to the townsfolk for their welcome when I helplessly locked on to the searing gaze of Graciela Olivares. She seemed to be standing on a low wall, for her shoulders were easily visible above even the tallest townsfolk. This gave her a clear pathway of sight to burn her fury towards me. I wanted to assure her I was as helpless in this event as a tethered lamb. It had never occurred to me that she wouldn't be Aimery's wife. If only I could explain that the talks between the two heads of household happened in private and were announced without me having any say in the agreement, that my pain matched hers . . . but Henri was dragging me into the shadows of the cathedral porch, where the heat of day and Graciela's fire were instantly chased away by the cool.

I took one long last draught of freedom and on the air I tasted my beloved Grasse, picking out its flavours with ease as though I was pointing to each on a store shelf. They were imprinted on my memory and I could select them as I chose, and yet when they reached me fresh of a morning it was as though I smelled them for the first time.

The sun-coaxed honeyed lusciousness of rose came first, tumbling on the soft thermals rising from the valley to the summit where I stood, soon to take holy vows. I reached for the waft of violet . . . there it was, syrupy and haunting, before it was pushed aside by woody, camphorous rosemary and the earthy yet elegant thyme that was never far away. They were using essential oils we'd

distilled months earlier. Right now we were approaching jasmine harvest but the sensual jasmine would come into its own tonight. Even so, more flavours crowded; I wished I could linger to pick out more, but Henri was guiding me into the shadow of the vestibule.

People were clearing throats, glancing around, standing. Children were staring. I couldn't bear to meet the glance of anyone; instead I fixed my gaze on the dark stone of the church walls ahead.

Henri touched my fingertips, which clasped his arm loosely. 'Ready to do battle?' he whispered in the strange language of our mother's tongue.

It seemed timely given what Europe was facing but it was an old jest from childhood and nearly undid me. However, I embraced the affection he'd hoped he could elicit with that question.

'Tally ho,' I whispered, using the familiar yet odd response that none of us children had ever understood.

He grinned and I saw her in him and a fleeting echo of our father's smile. And then we were walking, our steps matched to the solemn music; underfoot I crushed fresh rose petals, dropped by the small child chosen as flower girl for the ceremony. Blanche was the daughter of one of our staff. I wondered if she was imagining her own wedding day. I wished Blanche a happier union as the fragrance of roses once again lifted and cradled me in its familiar scent, which I had known throughout my life. It reassured, and I held myself straighter to the organ's sombre music, which Henri had also chosen.

Eight hundred years of memory and knowledge embraced me. I knew this former cathedral, now simply called our church, almost as well as I knew my own home with its crooked stone pillars soaring to the vault of the gothic ceiling and strengthened by iron girders. Simple, grey marble tiles underfoot echoed its inherent modesty. Cold stone surrounded me and for now suited my heart. I noted some crumbling in the dark grey walls.

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'We should contribute some money to restore our church,' I whispered. It was inappropriate – a useless comment – but I needed to have a reason to talk to Henri or I would be forced to acknowledge the beaming audience come to bear witness. Maybe that was the bribe offered to coerce our priest into overlooking the necessary paperwork. He was a sweet, elderly man, no doubt intimidated by both the Delacroix and De Lasset chieftains.

'It's fine,' Henri said, patting my hand as he might an obedient pet. He surely knew what I was thinking.

I shifted my gaze from my hem towards the high windows near the ceiling. It had always intrigued me that all but one of the windows had clear glass. Perhaps Henri was right to leave the cathedral be. The sobriety made that single, richly stained glass window all the more beautiful for its presence.

We were nearly there and I finally had to look ahead to the cluster of men awaiting me: priest, husband-to-be, twin. Felix glanced over his shoulder, flashed me a devil-be-damned grin and whispered something to the man he stood next to. But the groom did not turn; he stood patiently, as he had waited all of his life for me to grow up and be old enough for him to steal me from my family.

Henri and I drew alongside. I stood nearly shoulder to shoulder with Aimery but he would never see me as his equal, never recognise me as my own person; from today my role was to support his every need and, above all, deliver him the heir he now required . . . and perhaps a few as spares.

Only months ago I'd listened to the men talking about war, but the conversation had a distant quality as though even they believed it couldn't ever happen. The news filtering through newspapers and various reports suggested the shared royal blood of Queen Victoria's grandchildren may not be enough to save Europe from dragging itself into all-out war because of the troubles between Austria–Hungary and Serbia.

I'd switched off from the conversation. Our father had been too old to be physically involved in the Franco–Prussian war and my brothers yet to be born. Germany's hostility remained buried in alliances. I knew only what I'd learned at school and, despite being fed a regular diet of war propaganda, politics interested me only marginally more than marrying Aimery. My inspiration, the reason I would wake and smile for the day ahead, was to help my father and Felix to make perfume. The rest of the world held little interest for me other than where we might discover new plants, new elements.

Although I could demonstrate the gift, I was not permitted to be known as '*le nez*' but my advice was sought, indulged; I was part of the family apparatus that had delivered the exquisite and popular *Minuit*. I had even chosen the name of midnight. More recently our *Coeur de Printemps* had created an avalanche of orders and to achieve that sense of spring's heartbeat we had combined a dazzling eleven notes so finely balanced that I remember how we argued down to the last minuscule drop of vetiver. We had hotly debated whether to include anise or leave its broody presence out and whether iris stayed plush enough after the first joyous whiff had dried away. Felix and I had disagreed about lavender, sat on opposite ends of the table over grapefruit, suffered angst over the inclusion of ambergris.

My mind was always full of combinations. I felt I had no room for the drama of when the Kaiser had offended Russia, and Germany's neighbours had suddenly unified against it in shared resentment of Berlin. Britain – my mother's homeland and a naval titan – had become alarmed at Germany's build-up of its seafaring might. I had the awareness that Europe was suddenly divided into two opposers – ourselves with the Entente, Germany with its allies – that we identified as the Central Powers but it was not truly impacting on me yet. I can remember my father talking to that same doctor,

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Monsieur Bertrand, that war across Europe seemed inevitable.

Aimery apparently agreed and this was why he had pressed for the marriage – to get his line established, get sons born to carry the family name and business forward, no matter what. And as I stood there, staring at the single stained-glass window that radiated colour around me like divine ornamentation on a neutral scene below, I had a moment of dawning that Henri would be next. He would marry urgently now to achieve the same aim. He had no intention of risking leaving the Delacroix future in the hands of a woman, even one with the sublime talent he knew I possessed. He was so rigid, he would rather risk birthing a male heir without the skill so long as the family had a Delacroix man at its head. And there was always Felix . . . the family ‘nose’ was intact through him – he could guide the new heir as he grew.

I gave our priest a look of accusation and he had the grace to avert his gaze, filled with guilty remorse. We were all too far down this path to turn back now and I knew this lovely man would have been outnumbered, outmuscled by the heads of the foremost families of the community he served. I hoped that he had at least put up a good fight for me on moral grounds. The priest asked a question and I heard Henri answer formally and yet couldn't determine the words for the sudden alarm in my mind that things were moving fast now – I had only moments of Delacroix freedom remaining to savour. Every ounce of my body was denying progress but duty was the lead in my feet. Contrastingly light of heart, Henri was beaming as he nodded at Aimery, delighted to unload the burden of the spinster sister. I didn't want Henri to leave me – a rare feeling – but he was unclasping us and handing me over to the new owner of his property.

Only now Aimery turned. He blinked. I saw satisfaction in his expression and I had to look away for fear of picking up my skirt hem again and bolting from the church.