

La Vieille Abbaie, Provence, June 1988

The acrid smell of smoke hung in the air, choking and oppressive. Bits of ash rose and eddied for a few seconds before drifting down to settle somewhere else. The sun hadn't cleared the horizon yet but dawn was slowly illuminating the eastern sky and suffusing the gardens with clear, soft light. Already the lamps that Guillaume had brought looked ineffectual by comparison.

Esther surveyed the charred remains of the building then turned away, trying to clear her head. She needed to *think*. The alcohol of the night before, the lack of sleep and now this pervasive smoke were all conspiring to dull her senses. After all the desperate and feverish activity, the confusion of people coming and going, suddenly it felt very empty. There was nothing else to be done here. The men were clearing the hosepipes away; the women had gone back to the house.

She heard a cough and quickly looked round, peering through the fog of smoke. Guillaume had returned and was standing the other side of the smoking, sodden mess. Was he looking at the devastation or at her? It was hard to tell. He picked his way round to join her.

'The police have gone, Miss Langley,' he said. Tiredness had made his French accent more noticeable than usual.

'Will it be all right, do you think?' she asked anxiously. 'They accepted my story?'

'Yes, I think so. No, I'm sure they did.'

'Good, good. Still, there might be... I don't want gossip about this Guillaume. You know what the press are like. If they find out we had a party and then this...' She glanced reluctantly back at the ruin. 'But you've got contacts, haven't you? You're a local. You know these people.' Her smile pleaded with him. 'Please keep it quiet for me. Whatever it takes.'

'I'll do my best, Miss Langley.'

'Thank you Guillaume. What would I do without you?' On an impulse she leaned forwards and planted a soft kiss on his cheek, then suddenly remembered his hands and looked down. They both had dressings on them. 'How are your hands?'

'They will be fine, thank you. Claudine looked at them for me. Which reminds me: I managed to get that painting out that was downstairs. It's over by the edge of the lawn over there.' He turned and gestured with one padded hand. 'It is damaged though.'

'Thank you. But you shouldn't have risked yourself.'

He shrugged and shook his head. He looked exhausted and she let him go.

Esther walked past the swimming pool which now reflected the opalescent dawn, and onto the lawn. She found the painting; it was in a terrible state. She stared at it for a moment, frowning, then made her way slowly back up to the house.

## Chapter 1

Oxford, March 1990

Nathan picked up the bottle of varnish and poured a generous finger's depth into a small bowl, watching the new woman out of the corner of his eye. This was her fifth day with them and he was already convinced that she had attitude. Timothy had taken her on to replace Gary. Nathan had liked Gary. He'd been easy-going, co-operative, a real team worker, more likely to crack a joke than to argue. Whereas this woman – Hannah something French, he couldn't remember what – was not going to be easy to work with at all, he could tell.

Nathan focused back on the job in hand, dipped his brush in the varnish and started methodically coating the painting on the table in front of him, working from top to bottom.

It was Friday morning and they were in the Oxford workshops of Blandish Fine Art Conservation, a business Timothy Blandish had started twenty years previously. He had gradually expanded the studios and now employed five restorers plus Daphne, the receptionist. Timothy himself rarely picked up a scalpel or brush in anger any more. His role, as he saw it, was to bring the work in and organise others to do it. He specialised in offering a bespoke service to the wealthy and insecure. For those clients who were reluctant to send their precious paintings away, or for those who simply could not for some practical reason, Timothy sent the restorer to them. Most of their clients had the space and the means to have someone living and working on site for as long as it took.

Presumably Hannah would be on probation for a while, thought Nathan, working in the workshops. That would be good. Timothy insisted on keeping two restorers back at base for what he called their 'tick over work' and Steve Chorley never went away. That would mean Nathan could be released to travel again. He was ready for that.

He forced himself to concentrate on smoothly overlapping the brushstrokes of varnish all the way to the bottom of the picture. It was a portrait by Reynolds which he'd recently finished cleaning. He soaked up the excess in the last bead of varnish with his brush then straightened up and surveyed his work. As always, the varnish lifted the colours and added depth and vibrancy and he felt the familiar glow of satisfaction. Another coat or two and it would be good to go.

'Hi.'

He looked round quickly. Hannah had loomed up and was staring at his work table and the equipment laid out there.

'You are neat, aren't you?' She flicked him a quick, piercing look. 'Which varnish are you using by the way?'

He showed her and she nodded but said nothing. He sensed criticism.

'Finding your way around?' he said. 'I imagine Timothy'll have you started on a project next week.'

'I hope so. I much prefer to be working. But I understand we do a lot of work away from here – in situ?'

'Yes. Quite often. Is that a problem for you?'

'Not at all. I'd welcome it.' She produced a rare smile and gave a little shrug. 'I'm happy to work alone.'

I'll bet you are, thought Nathan.

The intercom on the wall near the door crackled and Daphne's voice chirped at them.

‘Hannah. Could you come downstairs please? Mr Blandish would like to see you in his office.’

Hannah walked away to the stairs and Nathan watched her go: dark, urchin cut hair; drainpipe jeans; an oversized check shirt and huge trainers with thick rubber soles which made her legs look even skinnier than they already were. She walked purposefully, head held high. Definitely an attitude. Then his eyes narrowed. Why had she been summoned like that?

A moment later, he abandoned the Reynolds – it needed to dry anyway – and went downstairs too. When he reached reception, Daphne pointed one warning finger towards the office at the rear of the room then put it to her lips. The door stood slightly ajar and they could hear the drone of Timothy talking.

‘What’s it about?’ he mouthed, jerking his head in the direction of the office.

Daphne knew everything that went on at the studios. And a surprising number of other things too.

‘He’s dividing up the next round of jobs,’ she said.

‘And she’s being told first?’

Nathan frowned and half turned, cocking his head to listen. For a man, Timothy’s voice had a shrill tone; it carried.

‘All things considered, I’ve decided to send you to Miss Langley’s. She’s got four paintings that need attention and she’s happy to offer accommodation.’

‘Esther Langley, the actress,’ Daphne mouthed at Nathan. ‘Lives in Provence. You must have heard of her.’

Nathan nodded, his frown deepening. Timothy was still speaking.

‘...can’t stress enough what an important client she is. We’re very honoured to have her business. And she’s a charming lady; I spoke to her on the phone. Quite charming.’

Nathan rolled his eyes. Timothy became irritatingly sycophantic around pretty women, especially if they were famous and wealthy. He liked to think he had a way with women; his two ex-wives probably disagreed.

‘And, of course,’ Timothy went on, ‘we want her to recommend us to her friends. I gave her an estimate from the photographs she sent me but, as you know, it’s difficult to judge a painting’s condition from a photo. So do a thorough assessment of the work, what needs doing, how long it’ll take, the usual drill, put it in writing and send it to me. Then I’ll give her a more accurate estimate of the cost. She said to go ahead anyway which is good. Miss Langley’s not at home at the moment. She’s off shooting a movie in the States, I gather.’

Hannah was talking now but her voice was softer and more mellow. It was impossible to make out the words.

‘Good, good,’ said Timothy. ‘That’s what I thought. Anyway, Miss Langley seemed to think she’ll be back before you finish.’ There was a brief pause. ‘Now look Hannah, your last employer said you were *very thorough. Great attention to detail*, she said. Now I like that, I do, I told you that at your interview. It’s good.’

He paused. Nathan could hear the inevitable ‘but’ in his voice. He imagined the oleaginous smile that always preceded it.

‘But don’t forget that we always have a waiting list,’ said Timothy. ‘Do what’s necessary, no more, make sure the client’s happy, then move on. Don’t get carried away and linger. Time is money after all.’

Daphne and Nathan exchanged a look. Hannah replied again inaudibly.

‘Of course, of course,’ Timothy said dismissively. ‘I know you’ll use good judgement but don’t forget to ring me with a regular progress report. This is the address and contact details. Let them know when you’ll be arriving. Get your trunk ready. Alan explained all about the trunks I assume, showed you where we keep our materials and equipment? It’s your

responsibility to make sure it's stocked with everything you think you'll need. Daphne'll organise the collection of it and your travel arrangements.' A hesitation. 'And remember, it may be Provence but it's not a holiday.'

'Of course not.' Hannah's voice, raised, firm and indignant, was clear that time.

'Fine.' Another, slightly longer, pause from Timothy. 'Do dress tidily, won't you? It's probably quite a smart place and we do have a reputation to maintain. Still, I'm sure you'll be a credit to us. Oh, here are the photographs Miss Langley sent me.'

'Good advice about the clothes,' Nathan muttered to Daphne. 'Have you seen the things she wears?' He pulled a wry grin.

Daphne glared a warning as Hannah appeared beside him. With those damn rubber soles he hadn't heard her coming but she'd probably heard him. She stared at him for a long moment then turned to Daphne.

'I need to get to a place called Tourbelle la Vierge in Provence as early next week as possible. I understand you can sort that out for me?'

'Yes. I've looked up where it is. You need a flight to Marseille and you'll need a rental car. Miss Langley lives up in the hills. And I should be able to get your trunk collected this afternoon.'

'Great. Thanks.'

'Special food requirements for the plane?'

'No. Anything edible.'

Daphne smiled and picked up the phone. 'I can't promise that.' She referred to a list in a notebook and dialled a number. 'Just think,' she murmured, 'when they finish building the channel tunnel, you'll be able to get a train straight through to Paris. And then...' She shrugged, eyebrows raised. '...well, wherever you want to go.' Someone spoke in her ear and she looked away. 'Hello, yes. I'm looking for flights to Marseille, Monday or Tuesday next week.'

'So—o,' Nathan said to Hannah, trying to sound conversational, 'Provence. Nice call.'

'You were listening.'

'Not exactly. Timothy's voice carries. Still... spring in Provence. That's a good gig when you've only just arrived. I guess you must have quite a résumé. I mean, Timothy usually has new people kicking their heels for months in the workshops, breaking them in. You're not related to him or anything, are you?'

He had meant it as a joke – well, sort of – but it hadn't come out that way.

Her eyes narrowed. 'No, I'm not even *anything*. And I don't believe I need *breaking in*. I guess maybe I have got quite a résumé at that. How long have you been here, Nathan?'

He straightened, pulling back his shoulders. 'Six and a half years.'

'Really? That's amazing. And aren't you allowed out yet? That must be so frustrating.'

He opened his mouth to reply but Daphne cut in, demanding Hannah's attention and the moment had gone.

'The earliest flight I can get is on Wednesday,' said Daphne, her hand over the mouthpiece.

'OK then, that's fine. Let's take that.'

A few minutes later, all the travel arrangement made, Hannah turned back to him.

'I'd better go and sort out my trunk. If you'll excuse me, that is?'

She walked away, head held high, and made for the stairs to the basement. Nathan watched her go then looked back at Daphne.

'What is it with her?'

'Come on, Nathan, you asked for that. Your jealousy's showing.'

'I'm not jealous.'

'No?'

‘Well, maybe.’ He sighed, glancing back at Timothy’s office door to check it was closed. ‘Spring and summer in Provence? And at some fancy villa probably. I could have done with that right now. But it’s not just that: it’s a matter of principle. I’m the senior restorer here. Why should she get the best job going? She talked him into it, didn’t she? A flash of those big eyes and he’s putty in her hands.’

‘Really Nathan, she doesn’t strike me as the type. In fact, I rather like her. It’s about time we had another woman working here.’ Daphne studied his face. ‘You seem a bit tense this morning and you were late arriving. Is everything OK?’

‘I had a phone call just as I was about to leave.’

‘Your mother fretting again?’

He felt the familiar tension in his jaw. ‘Yes. Same old same old. It doesn’t matter what I say.’ He sighed. ‘It’s coming up to the anniversary again.’

Daphne nodded sympathetically but didn’t comment.

‘You know this Provence job might not be so great,’ she remarked instead. ‘It’s not a villa; it’s an old abbey, all stone and cloisters. I saw some photos in a magazine. And they say Esther Langley can be a bit... odd. Unpredictable.’

Nathan managed a smile. Daphne was a sweetheart. ‘You’re just trying to make me feel better.’ He pushed his glasses up his nose and leaned against the desk. ‘What do you know about Hannah then? You must have seen her file.’

‘Yes. She’s thirty-eight, same as you more or less, and has moved around a bit. She’s worked at a couple of big galleries, one in London, one in Paris plus two private restoration studios.’ Daphne shrugged. ‘She’s had a lot of experience with Renaissance paintings. Oh and she’s half French – no surprise there given the surname – and speaks French fluently. So there you are.’

‘There I am, what?’

‘That’s why he’s sending her to France. He always sends Michael to Germany ’cause he’s half Swiss and speaks German.’

Nathan grunted. He pulled himself away from the desk. ‘I’d better get...’

Timothy’s office door opened and he appeared in the doorway.

‘Thought I heard you, Nathan. Where are you at with that Reynolds?’

‘I’ve just started revarnishing it. Alan’s already done the frame. I’m waiting to put the second coat on.’

‘Good, good.’ Timothy looked at his wrist watch. ‘I’ve got someone coming in shortly. Pop down at twelve, will you? I’ve got a job for you up in Scotland next: a quick clean ready for an exhibition. I’ll tell you all about it then.’

He retreated back into his office and Nathan looked back at Daphne.

‘Scotland,’ he muttered. ‘Great.’

‘Scotland’s beautiful,’ she said, and smiled. ‘You wanted to get away.’

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It was one-thirty on a dull, rainy afternoon on the last Wednesday in March when Hannah arrived at Marseille airport. She picked up the hire car, glanced at the address and map one last time, and hit the road. She had visited France many times, partly for work and partly for pleasure but she didn’t know this area at all and drove carefully, windscreen wipers swishing back and forth. It was easy to go miles out of your way on these French autoroutes if you missed your turning. She was heading north and east, the smudgy blue line of the distant Luberon mountain range leading her on.

Esther Langley was British but had lived for several years in the States and usually worked there. Though she still had an apartment in Los Angeles, she now lived in France, a couple of

miles outside the town of Tourbelle la Vierge, buried somewhere in that far off range of mountains. Daphne had been the source of this information. Hannah had heard of the actress, knew that she had made some big box office films, had even seen her a couple of years previously playing a brilliant and chilling Mrs Danvers in a new retelling of du Maurier's *Rebecca*. But Hannah wasn't a movie buff while Daphne apparently devoured both celebrity and house magazines, delighting in the details of other people's lives and their homes. Hannah liked Daphne. She was in her fifties, intelligent, easy-going and approachable.

'Esther's forty-four now and lives with an actor called David Flaxman,' she'd told Hannah. 'He's a Brit who's lived and worked in the States for years. A real hunk. She's pretty gorgeous too. But then they pay a fortune to look like that, don't they?'

'What about the paintings?' asked Hannah. 'Is she an art collector?'

'I'm not sure. I'll see if I can find an article about her. I've got a stack of magazines at home.'

But Daphne had forgotten about the magazines. Her elderly mother, who lived with her, hadn't been well over the weekend. Hannah wasn't bothered. It had only been idle curiosity.

She'd spent more of her time on the journey thinking about her new job. After all that had happened in these last months, she'd needed the move, the fresh start, and good jobs in art restoration weren't easy to come by. The Blandish studios had a decent reputation and, despite the technical limitations of restoring paintings in situ, she welcomed the prospect of working alone, trusting to her own initiative. Timothy, she had been warned by friends in the art world, was fair but miserly. He was old-fashioned too and suspicious of new gadgets, including computers. Or maybe it was their cost. She had already gleaned that he was a control freak which could prove challenging. Alan was all right and Steve was a pleasant guy; he usually worked at base apparently because his wife needed care. Nathan was a different matter. Serious eyes behind serious glasses and a condescending manner. He couldn't be much older than her. That snide remark about her being related to Timothy still rankled. And what was wrong with the way she dressed? Yes, she liked to keep it casual and fun but there was no point dressing up to work on old paintings. Nathan's clothes were positively bland; he probably had a personality to go with them.

Hannah focused back on the road. She took the Boulevard du Sud, looping west, then north round the medieval walls of Tourbelle la Vierge, and glanced up at it as she passed, a small town pressed tight against the hillside. It looked bleak in the mid-afternoon gloom. Further on, she passed fields of twisted dark olive trees and bare, stunted vines. Some fields lay ploughed but barren. In the grey, moist light of a wet spring day the landscape bore disappointingly little resemblance to the hot canvases of Cézanne and Van Gogh.

One last turning, a lane winding through trees, and she came to a halt in front of tall gates. The rain had stopped but it was still grey and damp. A sign on one of the gateposts read: La Vieille Abbaye. Either side of the gates a high stone wall, with what looked like electric fencing on the top, stretched away into the trees and out of sight. She got out of the car and walked up to the intercom on the nearest gatepost. A security camera was angled down to examine her. Press and speak, was written in both English and French next to one of the buttons on the intercom.

'*Bonjour*, hello. I'm Hannah Dechansay. I'm the conservator who's come to work on Miss Langley's paintings.'

She released the button and waited. There was silence. She was about to speak again when the speaker crackled and a man's voice spoke slowly and clearly.

'Good day, Miss Dechansay. I shall open the gates. After going through, please stop by the building on your right.' The perfect English was spoken with a French accent.

The gates swung slowly back. She drove through and stopped. The building to her right was low and squat, built in the style of a lodge, set back a few feet from the driveway. The gates swung to behind her and a man walked round the front of the car to the driver's side. He was solid and broad-shouldered but not the classic security man she had envisaged. His grizzled hair was medium length and immaculate, his beard closely cropped. He wore dark blue trousers with a finely striped dark blue and cream shirt and a cream linen jacket thrown casually over the top. He was muscular but his movements were easy and fluid. He could have stepped right out of the pages of a men's clothing catalogue.

Hannah brought the window down as he bent over and smiled politely.

'Hannah Dechansay?' he said. 'Can I see your passport please?'

'Of course.' She handed it to him and he studied it, then her face, then the passport again before returning it to her. She noticed his hands were badly scarred.

'Thank you. I am Guillaume Bordier, the security officer here. How long are you going to be staying? Miss Langley didn't specify.'

'I'm not sure until I see the paintings. A little while, I think.'

He nodded slowly. 'I see. Then I shall speak to you again to explain how our security works. Now you must follow the driveway round to the left there.' He lifted one arm and pointed. 'You will see room to park on your left near the house. There will be other cars. From there it is a short walk to the front door. They will be expecting you.'

He was polite enough but something in his manner suggested she wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of him. He straightened up again, looking earnest and forbidding, and backed away to let her drive on. Maybe she was lucky he hadn't made her get out to frisk her.

The house, at first sight, appeared to be a long two-storied building – not perhaps as big as she had expected – built of pale grey stone, its windows hung with soft lavender shutters. She pulled into the parking area and turned off the engine. There were three other cars parked there, one of them a beautiful red Morgan. Nice. She could see a run of three garages over to the left, linked to the corner of the house by an archway of matching stone. Just for a moment, a young girl stood beneath the arch, her long dark hair falling behind her shoulders. She wore a white frock and was slight, ethereal even. The next minute she'd gone and Hannah wondered if she'd imagined her. Or maybe it was a ghost; abbeys had ghosts sometimes, didn't they? Stupid girl, she thought. It had been a long day.

She got out, pulled her case and bags out of the car boot and hefted them towards the front door which, flanked on each side by a large potted box bush, stood way over to the left of the building. High on the wall, another security camera was focused on her. She wondered if Guillaume was, even now, still watching her.

She pressed the doorbell and heard it peal inside. Three or four minutes later the door opened and a man stared at her with an expression of frank surprise. He was a similar age to herself, hair longish and tousled, a day's growth of beard on his face. He wore trainers, knee length shorts and a large shirt hanging loose over a tee shirt. He wasn't what she'd expected.

His expression became curious. 'Yes?'

'I'm Hannah Dechansay. I was told you were expecting me. Blandish Fine Art Conservation?'

He frowned. 'We are? In that case I suppose you'd better come in.' His accent was unmistakably British.

She dragged her case and bags into the hallway. He didn't offer to help.

'Guillaume usually rings through to say someone's here,' he said, rubbing the back of his hand against the stubble on his face. 'Clearly Sara didn't hear it. But she must be around somewhere.'

He left her standing there, glanced in through a door off a corridor to her right, then walked off down the passageway ahead and out of sight. Hannah looked round curiously. It was a square entrance hall with a flight of stairs leading up and round to her left. Wandering forward a couple of steps, Hannah started to see the true extent of the house and its abbey origins began to make sense. The room the man had looked into was the first in a line of rooms along a corridor to her right. Straight ahead the long passage also had rooms off to the left. Glancing out of a nearby window off the passage showed that the house was built round three sides of a quadrangle and it still had cloisters, framing the garden within.

A thin woman now walked towards her along the passage, taking brisk, agitated steps.

‘Hannah,’ she said, drawing near. A smell of nicotine came with her. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t hear the bell. Raff told me you were here. I’m Sara, Sara Plascott, Esther’s PA.’ She held out a bony hand. ‘How are you? Good journey, I hope?’

‘Fine, thank you. No problems.’

‘Then I’ll show you to your room. Esther’s away at the moment but I believe you have your instructions. My office is just there at the top of the west wing...’ She pointed towards the room the man had looked in. ‘...if you need anything. The paintings are all in the theatre, waiting for you. That’s where you’ll be working. God knows, it’s not used for much else these days.’ She surveyed Hannah’s luggage. ‘Any of this need to go there?’

‘No. My working kit is coming in a trunk, by carrier. A big thing.’ Hannah used her hands to show the size. ‘It should have been here by now. Isn’t it?’

‘No. Unless Guillaume’s put it in the theatre already and not bothered to tell me.’ Sara grabbed the suitcase and headed for the stairs, looking distracted. ‘He does that sometimes; drives me mad,’ she muttered.

It wasn’t clear if she was telling Hannah or talking to herself. Hannah followed.

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They turned left at the top of the stairs and kept walking. The long landing appeared to echo the passage below. Glancing out of windows as they went, Hannah could clearly see the two arms of the building embracing the large courtyard below.

‘This is you.’ Sara stopped abruptly by a door on her left.

Inside, Sara put the suitcase down and waved a hand vaguely towards a courtesy tray on the chest of drawers.

‘Help yourself to a drink. Claudine’s our housekeeper and cook and sorts us out with the help of a couple of part-time assistants, Liane and Dominique. Most of our meals are left out in the dining room, buffet style. You help yourself. Claudine’s busy and doesn’t like being disturbed in the kitchen so bear that in mind. Breakfast’s between seven and ten. Lunch between twelve-thirty and two. Dinner seven-thirty to nine-thirty. Claudine doesn’t work Sundays. She’s a keen churchgoer, very devout but an assistant usually fills in. Any special dietary needs, you’d better see her. She’s – what shall I say? – a woman of few words. Have you had lunch?’

‘I had something on the plane.’

Sara grunted and fixed Hannah with a look. ‘I wasn’t told how long you’re going to be here.’

‘I’m not sure yet either. It depends how long the work takes.’

‘I see. You’ve met Guillaume of course. He manages our security. Do pay attention to his instructions. He’s very diligent about enforcing them. Above all, we have a rule here: no-one discusses the abbey or its occupants outside these walls. Esther’s very strict about it. No gossip. If she finds out you’ve betrayed her, you’ll be gone so quick...’ Sara snapped her fingers.

‘Well, just so you know. You get to the theatre through a door down a passage next to the kitchen but I’ll come back and show you round later when you’ve had a chance to unpack.’

She retreated to the doorway, putting her hand to the handle of the door.

‘Sara?’ said Hannah. ‘Who’s Raff?’

‘Oh, Raff’s just... Raff’s an artist. He’s got a studio out on the estate. I’m sure he’ll show you it sometime if you’re interested. He likes people to be interested.’

And with that enigmatic response, she’d gone, shutting the door behind her.

There was a key in the lock and Hannah fingered it a moment, then quietly turned it. It was a bright but subtly furnished room with an en suite bathroom and a small television on the chest of drawers. The room’s single window faced east over the grounds and to the woods beyond. Looking out and down, Hannah could see a small annexe with its own neatly tended garden set back a little from the main house. For Claudine perhaps. She wondered how many people lived here.

She peeled off her new linen jacket and threw it on the bed. That was a relief. *Do dress tidily won’t you*, Timothy had said so she’d made an effort. She ran a hand through her hair, loosening it and easing the journey out of her system. She’d just had it cut again and it stuck up now in little spikes. She made herself a cup of tea and drank it while she unpacked. Esther’s staff seemed preoccupied with how long she was going to stay. From what she’d seen of the place so far, she wondered why it mattered. Would they even notice her?

*If she finds out you’ve betrayed her.* Sara’s words stuck in her head. Betrayal? Such emotive language. What was there to betray?