

## Prologue

### *Départ*

The very first hint of fragrance, experienced when the perfume bottle is first opened, before the fragrance is in direct contact with the skin, the nose, and the heart. Similar, really, to a book opened but not yet read . . . or, perhaps, a door opened to a visitor not yet visible, one who lurks in shadow. The *départ* begins the journey of the perfume and its wearer.

—From the notebooks of N. Tours

In the ornate doorway of Harrods' perfume hall people rushed past me as I stood, frozen.

A radio played somewhere, Churchill's voice rising over the crowd, commending the English again for surviving the storm-beaten voyage. The war was over; we were picking up the pieces and carefully, slowly putting our lives back together. But my daughter was lost, in her own way another war casualty. The grief struck me anew and I was immobile in a doorway, unable to go forward or backward, unmoored by grief.

A summer afternoon long ago Jamie and I went to Upton Lake to swim and make love, and there had been a boat, abandoned by rich summer people who didn't know how to tie a knot, and the boat had bobbed in the waves, turning this way and that as a storm stalked over the lake. I was that boat.

"Move on!" the doorman shouted at me, but my legs wouldn't work. I was exhausted. When I walked, there was a chant in my head, Dahlia is gone, Dahlia is gone, over and over, a syllable with every step, so that I hated to move. People pushed past me, some smiling in sympathy, some merely

irritated. Their string shopping bags and brown-wrapped boxes jostled me; their elbows poked.

The doorman frowned. He took me by the arm and pulled me out of that flood of people. “Look, dearie,” he said. “Are you coming or going?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

His expression softened. He was an older man with a deeply lined face, pale eyes sunk into their sockets, and there was an authority to him that went beyond his doorman’s uniform. Probably during the war he had been an air raid warden. He would have been too old to be a soldier.

“Well then,” he said. “Why don’t you go in? That’s always a good starting point. There you go.” He turned me around, gently, and gave me a little push, back to that threshold, where I suddenly remembered I wanted to enter, to continue the search for my daughter.

I moved through the doorway, overwhelmed by the synthetic florals and citruses of the postwar perfumes. They enter the nose aggressively, fighting for attention like unruly schoolchildren. What I most remembered about my own child was how the long braid she wore down her back smelled of lavender, a single note of innocence. My lost child.

Seventeen years ago, I ran away. And now, my daughter had, too, or at least I hoped she had, for the other possibilities were unthinkable. But after months of searching, I hadn’t found Dahlia in any of those places where a young girl might find shelter: not in the homes of friends in southern France; not in Paris in the narrow streets of Montparnasse, the cafés and gardens and boulevards of those years with Jamie; not in the orphanages that sheltered children whose parents had not survived. She had left no trace.

So I had come, finally, to London, to the almost-beginning. Beginnings are like endings, never completely finished, simply receding like the horizon. Here, in the doorway of Harrods, one rainy morning almost two decades ago, Jamie and I had agreed that we would leave England and go to Paris, and that if all went well, we would marry and begin our family. I had told Dahlia that story, how I had dreamed of her years before she was born.

I had already been in London for three days, walking the streets, asking hotel clerks and checking registers at shelters, looking for her, fighting down panic and dread. The boardinghouse where Jamie and I had stayed had been bombed and so had the little pub where we had had our noon fish-and-chips and pint. There was destruction everywhere. St. Paul's Cathedral had been bombed, St. James's Palace, Houses of Parliament. Half the population of London had been made homeless. This was no place for a young girl on her own, even one with papers and a little cash, for her papers and her savings had disappeared with her.

Dahlia is sixteen, I kept reminding myself. She was tall and strong and sensible. She spoke French and English fluently and could get by in Italian and German. She had good common sense. She had what she needed to survive, if her luck held.

How had I produced such a child, me, the gardener's daughter from Poughkeepsie? Dahlia was a wonder to me, but in my dread I didn't think of her as strong and competent, but as a lost child crying for her mother.

My lost child. Would I be returning home without her again? I had gone back and forth from Paris to Grasse for months, always leaving home with hope, returning in despair. Home again, without Dahlia. The thought kept me motionless inside that doorway.

"Hey!" a voice muttered. "Move on." A woman, tall, burdened with an armful of parcels, almost knocked me over in her haste to get out the door.

"Watch yourself!" I snapped back. The woman looked at me over the top of her packages.

"Oh my God," she said.

Once she had lowered her arms and I could see her face, I knew her immediately. Lee Miller.

The very famous and beautiful Lee Miller, the *Vogue* model, the muse for the artist Man Ray, who had made of her lips an iconic image of a woman's mouth floating in the sky. She had gone on to become a famous photographer—the only woman photographer who covered battles, not just field hospital follow-ups and stories about the war nurses. She had photographed the London Blitz, the siege

of Saint-Malo, the Alsace campaign, the camps in Germany. Nightmare photos.

Lee was heavier than I remembered, and there was a puffiness around the eyes and in the cheeks that drinkers sometimes got. But nothing, not war, alcoholism, or middle age, could mar that perfect nose and those cheekbones, the thick wavy blond hair now worn postwar-style, falling over one eye. Those oh-so-famous lips.

We stood for a long while, staring at each other in disbelief. It's not often that you run smack into your own past.

## Part One

### *Note de Tête*

Top note: the fragrance first released when the perfume achieves initial contact with the skin of the wearer, predominating in the olfactory sense for approximately fifteen minutes. Quite often these first notes of fragrance remind the wearer of a certain day in childhood, the smell of a chamomile lawn or a spice cake, or a sunny day at a picnic spot. The top note is the first station on the journey, where the decision of yes or no must be made.

—From the notebooks of N. Tours

In the kingdom of smells, everything is either bliss or torture.

—Colette

## Chapter One

“You!” she said, and a few of her top parcels fell, as if in emphasis. The old doorman saluted and bent to retrieve them. Lee straightened her hat with a preoccupied gesture. She wore an expensive suit, well cut of real Scottish tweed, but it had seen better days. “I haven’t seen you since . . .” She paused, thinking.

“Paris. Nineteen thirty-two,” I supplied.

“Yes. Paris.” Her face softened. With the help of the doorman, she balanced her packages in a way that allowed her to extend her gloved hand.

Lee shook hands like a man, with a strong grip and a pumping action. You had to stand your ground or her handshake could knock you off-balance.

“You are dressing much better,” she said. “I like the jacket. Good lines.”

It was one of Dahlia’s jackets, made for her by Omar’s housekeeper. Omar was my dear friend in Grasse, but I didn’t say that, because then I would have to talk about Dahlia and explain who Omar was and it would be difficult to end all the explanations. Seventeen years is a long time, even longer when a war stalks through them. Sixteen years could not be condensed to casual chitchat in the doorway of Harrods. “I like your suit,” I said, settling for the predictable.

“I still feel more comfortable in trousers and combat boots.” Lee hesitated, considering. Perhaps she was pursuing phantoms as well.

“Can you come for tea with me?” she asked. She hadn’t lost her startling spontaneity.

“I have an appointment,” I lied.

“Please. Just for a few minutes. I’d love the company. I just bought a new hat and really don’t know if it works or not. I need another woman’s opinion.” The hat was just an excuse, of course.

“Okay,” I agreed reluctantly.

She laughed with delight. “Okay!” she echoed. “That beautiful American word. Oh, how wonderful to talk with another American. Follow me.”

We dodged between jammed and honking cars, splashing through puddles, to a tearoom across the street. Without waiting for the hostess, Lee took the best available table, by the center window.

“Can’t get over the traffic,” she said with a sigh. “You take your life in your hands just trying to cross the street. During the war there wasn’t a car in sight, most afternoons. Certainly not at night, during the blackout.”

When she took off her coat and draped it over the chair between us, her perfume tingled in my nostrils, expensive and slightly burning from a note of geranium oil. The scent of geranium swept me back to Grasse, to the dark mixing room, the shelves of bottles, the locked safe where the formula was kept. *Jamais de la Vie* was an expensive perfume, still made by the *enfleurage* method, each flower petal hand pressed into a sheet of lard to capture its fragrance. Lee was wearing the equivalent of a hundred roses and jasmine flowers.

She leaned closer. “Were you here for the bombing, or did you go back to the States?”

I still wasn’t used to the openness with which some people spoke of those years. For me, they were locked boxes. I was also taken aback by how much I knew about Lee, and how very little she knew about me. Friends and family had made sure that, for years, I knew of Lee’s doings, her work and travel, her lovers. Obviously no one had thought to give her news of me. But that is the nature of fame, isn’t it? Lee was famous.

Lee ordered tea and a large pot soon arrived, and a plate of pastries. We sat at our lace-covered table and poured Earl Grey into china teacups. Lee took a silver flask from her purse and poured a healthy shot into her tea. I thought somehow it was all a mad dream, it couldn’t be real; Man Ray would walk in at any moment, demanding attention, asking Lee where she’d been, and Jamie would be just behind Man, looking anxious. No, that was years ago. The world now, after the destruction, was made of hot water flavored with burned grain fake-coffee, and all the teacups had been broken.

Lee bit into an *éclair* and the cream oozed out, smearing her crimson mouth. She laughed and flicked

her tongue out to the corners. “Real cream,” she said with delight. “I shouldn’t be eating this. Impossible to lose weight these days. Didn’t I hear you were in France during the war?”

“I heard you were all over Europe, often in two or three places at the same time,” I said, avoiding her question. “I saw some of your photos.”

An edition of British *Vogue* had made its way to the zinc counter of Omar’s café, there in my little village in the hills of southern France. The war photos had been almost surreal in their horror. I had thought at the time, leafing through that dog-eared magazine, that our years in Paris, the experiments in surrealism, had somehow been a training ground for what was to come: the violence, the disconnection.

Man Ray, her lover, protector, and promoter during those prewar Paris years, had once made a sculpture of Lee with a single eye representing the entire body of the woman he adored. He had constructed another image in which he had slit her neck, making a crimson gash like an extra mouth. The body had been reduced to separate parts. We were none of us whole. Maybe that was how we had survived, in parts, like pages torn out of a book so that the story could not be read but only guessed at.

Lee sneezed and coughed into a handkerchief. “Wretched cold,” she complained. “Had it for weeks. So what did you think of my photos?”

I came back to the moment, to the teacup in my hand, the plate of cakes with their sensual promise of cream and vanilla. Lee wanted me to praise her photos. It was easy to do.

“They were magnificent. Dozens of gray tones.” I had remembered that much about photography. A rich photograph had as much color as the real world, except all the colors were some variant of gray. In some ways, perfumes were like black-and-white photographs. Most people will say of a scent “That is floral” or “That is citrus” when, in fact, the perfume has dozens, perhaps a hundred, different components. Art is all subtle variation.

“You remembered our discussions. I’m flattered.” Lee preened slightly, tilting her head and smiling more broadly, still dabbing at her nose.

“And the light in the photographs,” I said. “You made natural light seem precise, even staged, like in a painting.”

“Light,” she said quietly. “That’s always the most important element, isn’t it?” The smile disappeared. She looked out the window at the wet, dismal street. “During the blackouts I thought there would never again be enough light in the world, that it could never fall with a promise of grace instead of a threat. Have you seen Pablo’s *Le charnier—The Charnel House*? All black and white and gray, like *Guernica*. For a while the whole world seemed black and white and gray. Even the battlefields. The blood turned gray. Did you see the exhibition in Paris, Art and Resistance? How come I didn’t see you there?”

Lee’s fingers tapped nervously on the table.

“I wasn’t there,” I said.

We finished our tea, carefully speaking only of what did not matter. The weather. The new fashions, new movies. She never mentioned Jamie, nor did I.

“I hear back in the States they have invented color television,” Lee said.

“Have they?” I didn’t have or want a television. All I wanted to see of the world was just outside my window in Grasse. I wanted to see the lavender fields, and I wanted to hold my daughter. At the table next to us, a little girl began to wail that she wanted her dolly and her mother leaned over and whispered in her ear. The child stopped wailing, but sobbed those awful silent tears of a bereft child.

“Has your father bought one? A color television?” I asked, distracted by the little girl. Mr. Miller had been keen on new gadgets, often buying things for the joy of taking them apart and putting them back together. Lee had inherited her mechanical ability from him. From my own father, Mr. Miller’s yardman and gardener, I had inherited what in Grasse they called “a good nose.” I had been tested and could pick out three thousand different scents; most people could pick out only a few hundred.

“He’ll probably try to build his own.” Lee laughed. “And do it.” We fell silent, overwhelmed.

“Look.” She stood and pulled on her gloves. “Can you come to us this weekend? Come meet Roland. I married, you know. Twice, to be precise. Aziz and I married after you left Paris, but it didn’t last. God, Cairo was so boring. But I think this one will last. Come meet the husband, and little Anthony. Yes, I have a child. A boy. The most beautiful little boy in the world. I’m absolutely besotted.”

Pain knifed my chest. “I didn’t plan a long stay,” I said, trying to sound a touch careless, a little

preoccupied with all the things I had to do. “And I didn’t bring evening clothes. In fact, I am wearing my entire travel wardrobe.”

It was a silly excuse but one that would do when the truth was too painful. I didn’t want to see Lee holding her child. Lee, who had never wanted to marry, to have children, now had both husband and son. And my child was lost; her father, the man who should have been my husband, was an ocean away, living with a different wife, a different family.

Lee laughed. “Darling, that doesn’t matter. Wear a sheet if you must. It will be like the old days. Do come! On Friday, take the afternoon train to Lewes and we’ll pick you up at the station. On Sunday, we’ll drive you to Newhaven and you can catch the ferry to France.”

She stood and reached for the bill, signing it rather than leaving cash. I read her signature upside down. Lady Penrose of Poughkeepsie, it said. Lee still had a sense of humor.

I hadn’t yet agreed to the weekend, so she played her strongest card.

“Pablo will be there,” she said, and was out the door before I could say no.

Pablo. When I had to leave Paris, Pablo Picasso had been the one to help me, not because we were close—we were not—or because he was particularly kind to young girls in trouble—he was not. It had merely been one of those life-forming coincidences. That day, as I stood on the Pont Neuf wondering where I would go, what I would do, he had come toward me on his way to somewhere. There was just enough kindness in his voice when he asked, “*Ça va?*” that I sobbed my story out to him. He had already known, of course. That’s the sad truth of betrayal. It makes a poor secret except to the betrayed.

He paused, then gave me a piece of paper on which he’d written the name of a friend who would take me in. He would write to her the very next day, he promised, and I fled to his friend, Madame Hughes, in Grasse. Seventeen years ago. A war ago. A child ago. A lifetime ago.