

# 1



*How on earth could I have let them talk me into it?*

The two generals of number 27 Rue Montagnard – Madame Bernard, the owner, and Madame Rosalette, the concierge – had caught Monsieur in a pincer movement between their ground-floor flats.

‘That Le P. has treated his wife shamelessly.’

‘Scandalously. Like a moth treats a wedding veil.’

‘You can hardly blame some people when you look at their wives. Fridges in Chanel. But men? Monsters, all of them.’

‘Ladies, I don’t quite know what . . .’

‘Not you of course, Monsieur Perdu. You are cashmere compared with the normal yarn from which men are spun.’

‘Anyway, we’re getting a new tenant. On the fourth floor. Yours, Monsieur.’

‘But Madame has nothing left. Absolutely nothing, only shattered illusions. She needs just about everything.’

‘And that’s where you come in, Monsieur. Give whatever you can. All donations welcome.’

‘Of course. Maybe a good book . . .’

‘Actually, we were thinking of something more practical. A table, perhaps. You know, Madame has —’

‘Nothing. I got that impression.’

The bookseller could not imagine what might be more practical than a book, but he promised to give the new tenant a table. He still had one.



Monsieur Perdu pushed his tie between the top buttons of his white, vigorously ironed shirt and carefully rolled up his sleeves. Inwards, one fold at a time, up to the elbow. He stared at the bookcase in the corridor. Behind the shelves lay a room he hadn't entered for almost twenty-one years.

Twenty-one years and summers and New Year's mornings.

But in that room was the table.

He exhaled, groped indiscriminately for a book and pulled Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* out of the bookcase. It didn't fall apart. Nor did it bite his hand like an affronted cat.

He took out the next novel, then two more. Now he reached into the shelf with both hands, grabbed whole parcels of books out of it and piled them up beside him.

The stacks grew into trees. Towers. Magic mountains. He looked at the last book in his hand. *When the Clock Struck Thirteen*. A tale of time travel.

If he'd believed in omens, this would have been a sign.

He banged the bottom of the shelves with his fists to loosen them from their fastenings. Then he stepped back.

There. Layer by layer, it appeared. Behind the wall of words. The door to the room where . . .

*I could simply buy a table.*

Monsieur Perdu ran his hand over his mouth. Yes. Dust down the books, put them away again, forget about the door. Buy a table and carry on as he had for the last two decades. In twenty years' time he'd be seventy, and from there he'd make it through the rest. Maybe he'd die prematurely.

*Coward.*

He tightened his trembling fist on the door handle.

Slowly the tall man opened the door. He pushed it softly inwards, screwed up his eyes and . . .

Nothing but moonlight and dry air. He breathed it in through his nose, analysing it, but found nothing.

— *'s smell has gone.*

Over the course of twenty-one summers, Monsieur Perdu had become as adept at avoiding thinking of— as he was at stepping around open manholes.

He mainly thought of her as—. As a pause amid the hum of his thoughts, as a blank in the pictures of the past, as a dark spot amid his feelings. He was capable of conjuring all kinds of gaps.

Monsieur Perdu looked around. How quiet the room seemed. And pale despite the lavender-blue wallpaper. The passing of the years behind the closed door had squeezed the colour from the walls.

The light from the corridor met little that could cast a shadow. A bistro chair. The kitchen table. A vase with the lavender stolen two decades earlier from the Valensole plateau. And a fifty-year-old man who now sat down on the chair and wrapped his arms around himself.

There had once been curtains, and over there, pictures, flowers and books, a cat called Castor that slept on the sofa. There were candlesticks and whispering, full wine glasses and music. Dancing shadows on the wall, one of them tall, the other strikingly beautiful. There had been love in this room.

*Now there's only me.*

He clenched his fists and pressed them against his burning eyes.

Monsieur Perdu swallowed and swallowed again to fight back the tears. His throat was too tight to breathe and his back seemed to glow with heat and pain.

When he could once more swallow without it hurting, Monsieur Perdu stood up and opened the casement window. Aromas came swirling in from the back courtyard.

The herbs from the Goldenbergs' little garden. Rosemary and thyme mixed with the massage oils used by Che, the blind chiroprapist and 'foot whisperer'. Added to that, the smell of pancakes intermingled with Kofi's spicy and meaty African barbecued dishes. Over it all drifted the perfume of Paris in June, the fragrance of lime blossom and expectation.

But Monsieur Perdu wouldn't let these scents affect him. He resisted their charms. He'd become extremely good at ignoring anything that might in any way arouse feelings of yearning. Aromas. Melodies. The beauty of things.

He fetched soap and water from the storeroom next to the bare kitchen and began to clean the wooden table.

He fought off the blurry picture of himself sitting at this table, not alone but with —.

He washed and scrubbed and ignored the piercing question of what he was meant to do now that he had opened the door to the room in which all his love, his dreams and his past had been buried.

*Memories are like wolves. You can't lock them away and hope they leave you alone.*

Monsieur Perdu carried the narrow table to the door and heaved it through the bookcase, past the magic mountains of paper onto the landing and over to the flat across the corridor.

As he was about to knock, a sad sound reached his ears.  
Stifled sobbing, as if through a cushion.  
Someone was crying behind the green door.  
A woman. And she was crying as though she wanted nobody,  
absolutely nobody, to hear.

## 2



‘She was married to You-Know-Who, Monsieur Le P.’

He didn’t know. Perdu didn’t read the Paris gossip pages.

Madame Catherine Le P.-You-Know-Who had come home late one Thursday evening from her husband’s art agency, where she took care of his PR. Her key no longer fitted into the lock, and there was a suitcase on the stairs with divorce papers on top of it. Her husband had moved to an unknown address and taken the old furniture and a new woman with him.

Catherine, soon-to-be-ex-wife-of-Le-Dirty-Swine, possessed nothing but the clothes she had brought into their marriage – and the realisation that it had been naïve of her to think that their erstwhile love would guarantee decent treatment after their separation, and to assume that she knew her husband so well that he could no longer surprise her.

‘A common mistake,’ Madame Bernard, the lady of the house, had pontificated in between puffing out smoke signals from her pipe. ‘You only really get to know your husband when he walks out on you.’

Monsieur Perdu had not yet seen the woman who'd been so coldheartedly ejected from her own life.

Now he listened to the lonely sobs she was desperately trying to muffle, perhaps with her hands or a tea towel. Should he announce his presence and embarrass her? He decided to fetch the vase and the chair first.

He tiptoed back and forth between his flat and hers. He knew how treacherous this proud old house could be, which floorboards squeaked, which walls were more recent and thinner additions and which concealed ducts that acted like megaphones.

When he pored over his eighteen-thousand-piece map of the world jigsaw in the otherwise empty living room, the sounds of the other residents' lives were transmitted to him through the fabric of the house.

The Goldenbergs' arguments (Him: 'Can't you just for once ...? Why are you ...? Haven't I ...?' Her: 'You always have to ... You never do ... I want you to ...') He'd known the two of them as newlyweds. They'd laughed together a lot back then. Then came the children, and the parents drifted apart like continents.

He heard Clara Violette's electric wheelchair rolling over carpet edges, wooden floors and doorsills. He remembered the young pianist back when she was able to dance.

He heard Che and young Kofi cooking. Che was stirring the pots. The man had been blind since birth, but he said that he could see the world through the fragrant trails and traces that people's feelings and thoughts had left behind. Che could sense whether a room had been loved or lived or argued in.

Perdu also listened every Sunday to how Madame Bomme and the widows' club giggled like girls at the dirty books he slipped them behind their stuffy relatives' backs.

The snatches of life that could be overheard in the house at

number 27 Rue Montagnard were like a sea lapping the shores of Perdu's silent isle.

He had been listening for more than twenty years. He knew his neighbours so well that he was sometimes amazed by how little they knew about him (not that he minded). They had no idea that he owned next to no furniture apart from a bed, a chair and a clothes rail – no knick-knacks, no music, no pictures or photo albums or three-piece suite or crockery (other than for himself) – or that he had chosen such simplicity of his own free will. The two rooms he still occupied were so empty that they echoed when he coughed. The only thing in the living room was the giant jigsaw puzzle on the floor. His bedroom was furnished with a bed, the ironing board, a reading light and a clothes rail on wheels containing three identical sets of clothing: grey trousers, white shirt, brown V-neck jumper. In the kitchen were a stove-top coffee pot, a tin of coffee and a shelf stacked with food. Arranged in alphabetical order. Maybe it was just as well that no one saw this.

And yet he harboured a strange affection for 27 Rue Montagnard's residents. He felt inexplicably better when he knew that they were well – and in his unassuming way he tried to make a contribution. Books were a means of helping. Otherwise he stayed in the background, a small figure in a painting, while life was played out in the foreground.

However, the new tenant on the third floor, Maximilian Jordan, wouldn't leave Monsieur Perdu in peace. Jordan wore specially made earplugs with earmuffs over them, plus a woolly hat on cold days. Ever since the young author's debut novel had made him famous amid great fanfare, he'd been on the run from fans who would have given their right arms to move in with him. Meanwhile, Jordan had developed a peculiar interest in Monsieur Perdu.

While Perdu was on the landing arranging the chair beside the kitchen table, and the vase on top, the crying stopped.

In its place he heard the squeak of a floorboard that someone was trying to walk across without making it creak.

He peered through the pane of frosted glass in the green door. Then he knocked twice, very gently.

A face moved closer. A blurred, bright oval.

'Yes?' the oval whispered.

'I've got a chair and a table for you.'

The oval said nothing.

*I have to speak softly to her. She's cried so much she's probably all dried out and she'll crumble if I'm too loud.*

'And a vase. For flowers. Red flowers, for instance. They'd look really pretty on the white table.'

He had his cheek almost pressed up against the glass.

He whispered, 'But I can give you a book as well.'

The light in the staircase went out.

'What kind of book?' the oval whispered.

'The consoling kind.'

'I need to cry some more. I'll drown if I don't. Can you understand that?'

'Of course. Sometimes you're swimming in unwept tears and you'll go under if you store them up inside.' *And I'm at the bottom of a sea of tears.* 'I'll bring you a book for crying then.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow. Promise me you'll have something to eat and drink before you carry on crying.'

He didn't know why he was taking such liberties. It must be something to do with the door between them.

The glass misted up with her breath.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes.'

When the hall light flared on again, the oval shrank back.

Monsieur Perdu laid his hand briefly on the glass where her face had been a second before.

*And if she needs anything else, a chest of drawers or a potato peeler, I'll buy it and claim I had it already.*

He went into his empty flat and pushed the bolt across. The door leading into the room behind the bookcase was still open. The longer Monsieur Perdu looked in there, the more it seemed as though the summer of 1992 were rising up out of the floor. The cat jumped down from the sofa on soft, velvet paws and stretched. The sunlight caressed a bare back, the back turned and became—. She smiled at Monsieur Perdu, rose from her reading position and walked towards him naked, with a book in her hand.

'Are you finally ready?' asked—.

Monsieur Perdu slammed the door.

No.