

**WILD  
LAVENDER**

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# ONE

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‘Simone, the lavender is waiting for you!’  
*Honk! Honk!*

‘Simone! Simone!’

I don’t know which woke me first: the horn on Bernard’s new car or my father calling me from the kitchen. I lifted my head from the pillow and frowned. The room was full of the smell of scorched cotton. The morning sun streaming through the open shutters was white with heat.

‘Simone, the lavender is waiting for you!’

There was mirth in my father’s voice. It sounded like there was mirth in Bernard’s car horn too. Sitting up, I saw the maroon touring car through the window, its top down, rolling along the road past the pine trees. Bernard was beaming at the wheel. The spokes on the tyres matched the brilliant white of his suit and panama hat. I wondered if Bernard chose his outfits to coordinate with his automobiles. The previous year, when British cars had been fashionable to drive, he had arrived in a black suit and bowler hat. He brought the car to a stop in the yard near the wisteria and looked over his shoulder. Further down the road a wagon trundled along. The driver was a swarthy-faced man and the passengers on board were as dark as aubergines.

I rolled out of bed and scurried around the room searching for my work dress. None of my clothes were hanging in the armoire; they were scattered under the bed or overflowing from the drawers of my dresser. I brushed my hair and tried to remember where I had left my dress.

‘Simone!’ my father called out again. ‘It would be nice to see you while it is still 1922.’

‘Coming, Papa!’

‘Oh! Did I disturb our Sleeping Beauty?’

I smiled. In my mind’s eye he was sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee in one hand and a piece of sausage perched on the end of a fork in the other. His walking cane was propped against his leg and his good eye was staring patiently at the landing for a sign of life.

I spotted my dress hanging on the back of the door and remembered that I had put it there the night before. I slipped it on over my arms and managed to fasten it without catching my long hair in the hooks.

Bernard’s car horn blasted again. I thought it strange that no one had invited him inside and looked out the window to see what was going on. But it wasn’t Bernard blowing the horn; it was a boy standing on the running board. His eyes were as round as plums. A woman with her hair tied under a scarf pulled him off and scolded him. But her displeasure was only for show. The boy smiled and his mother covered his forehead with kisses. The three male passengers unloaded trunks and sacks from the wagon. I watched the tallest one take down a guitar, cradling the neck and body as gently as a mother holds a child.

Uncle Gerome, his work hat pulled over his grey hair, spoke to the driver. From the way Uncle Gerome’s moustache turned down at the corners, I knew they were talking about money. He pointed towards the forest and the driver shrugged. The gesticulating went on for some minutes before the driver nodded. Uncle Gerome reached into his pocket and produced a pouch, counting each coin he placed in the other man’s palm. Satisfied, the driver shook hands with Uncle Gerome and waved farewell to the others before climbing back on the wagon and setting out on his way. Uncle Gerome plucked a notebook from his pocket and a pencil from behind his ear and scribbled the amount he had paid in his record book — the same book that kept account of the debts my father had to repay.

I kissed the crucifix near the door and rushed out. I was halfway down the hall before I remembered my good luck charm. I ran back to my room, picked up the sachet of lavender from the dresser and secreted it in my pocket.

My father was exactly where I'd expected, coffee and sausage in hand. Bernard sat next to him, nursing a glass of wine. Bernard had fought with my father in the trenches during the war. They were two men who would never have met if it had not been for those circumstances, and who had become the most loyal of friends. My father welcomed Bernard into our family, because he knew his friend had been rejected by his own. Bernard's blond hair seemed even paler than it had the last time I saw him. He sniffed the wine before drinking it, as he smelled everything in life before trying it. The first time Bernard came to visit, I found him standing in the yard and testing the air with his nose like a dog. 'Tell me, Simone, down that hill and near those juniper trees, is there a stream?' He was right, only you couldn't see the juniper trees from where we were standing and the stream was no more than a trickle.

My mother and Aunt Yvette darted about the kitchen, cleaning up the remains of breakfast: sausage, goat's cheese, boiled eggs and bread soaked in oil. Aunt Yvette felt in her apron pocket for her glasses and slipped them on so she could see if there was anything worth saving among the clutter on the table.

'What about me?' I cried, grabbing some bread off a plate before my mother snatched it away. She smiled at me. Her black hair was pinned in a roll on top of her head. My father called her his *señorita* because of her colouring, which I had inherited. My mother's skin was lighter than the complexions of the workers outside but dark compared to the Fleuriers, who, apart from me, had always been fair-haired and blue-eyed. Aunt Yvette's white eyebrows and pigmentless skin put her at the other extreme of colouring; she was salt and my mother was pepper.

My father held out his arms and feigned a hurt expression. 'Ah, thinking about food before the men in

your life,' he said. I kissed him on each cheek and then again on the scar where his left eye had been. Then I leaned over and kissed Bernard too.

'Careful of Bernard's suit,' Aunt Yvette warned.

'Nothing to be careful about,' answered Bernard. He turned to me and said, 'You've grown even taller, Simone! How old are you now?'

'I turn fourteen next month.' I sat down next to my father and flicked my hair over my shoulders. My mother and aunt exchanged a smile. My father pushed his plate over to me.

'I took two portions this morning,' he said. 'One for myself and one for you.'

I kissed him again.

There was a bowl of dried rosemary on the table and I sprinkled some on the bread. 'Why didn't you wake me up earlier?'

Aunt Yvette ran her fingers over my shoulders. 'We thought sleep might be more important to you.' Her wrist smelt of roses and I knew she had tried some of the perfume that Bernard always brought with him from Grasse. Aunt Yvette and Bernard were the civilising influences in our lives; although Uncle Gerome was the richest farmer in our region, we wouldn't have known what a *bidet* or a *croissant* was without them.

My mother poured a glass of wine for my father and refilled Bernard's half-full one. On her way back to the cupboard she cast a glance at my espadrilles. 'Bernard is right,' she said to me. 'You are growing so fast! When the shoe pedlar comes by next month we must get you proper boots. You'll lose your toes if you continue to wear those.'

We shared a smile. I didn't have my mother's gift for reading people's thoughts, but when I looked at her face — calm, reserved, proud — I always sensed her love for me, her only child.

'By next year she will have more pairs of shoes than she knows what to do with,' declared my father. He and Bernard clinked glasses.

Uncle Gerome caught my father's words as he came through the door. 'Not if we don't get to work on the lavender now,' he said.

'Ah, yes,' said Bernard, standing. 'I'd better be off. I have to visit two more farms before the morning is over.'

'Shall I take the gypsies some food?' I asked. 'They might be hungry after the journey.'

My father ruffled my hair, even though I had just brushed it. 'They're not gypsies, Simone. They're Spanish. And, unlike you, they're early risers. They've eaten already.'

I turned to my mother who nodded. I slipped a piece of bread into my pocket anyway. She had told me that the gypsies did that for good luck.

Outside, the workers waited with their sickles and rakes. Aunt Yvette tied on her bonnet, pulled down her sleeves and slipped on her gloves against the sun. Chocolat, her cocker spaniel, picked his way through the grass, followed by my tabby, Olly, only his ginger ears and tail visible above the tall stalks.

'Come here, boys!' I called.

The two balls of fur scampered towards me. Olly rubbed himself against my legs. I had rescued him from a bird snare when he was a kitten. Uncle Gerome said I could keep him if he caught mice and we didn't feed him. But my parents, my aunt and myself, we all fed him, slipping cheese and meat under the table whenever he brushed past our feet. As a consequence, Olly was as big as a melon and not much good for catching mice.

'I'll be back tomorrow for the distilling, Pierre,' Bernard said to my father. He kissed my mother, aunt and me. 'All the best for the harvest,' he said, stepping into his car. He gave a farewell wave to my uncle although Uncle Gerome had little time for our lavender-broker. No sooner had Bernard and his car disappeared beyond the almond trees than Uncle Gerome began an imitation of Bernard's mincing walk. Everyone ignored him. It was Bernard who had run through the gunfire and mud to the military

hospital with my father on his back. A shell had exploded in their trench, killing their commanding officer and everyone else within ten metres. And now, without Bernard's devotion to my father, and no thanks to Uncle Gerome, our side of the family would be without a sou.

We crossed the narrow stream. The lavender fields were oceans of purple before us. The plant never looked more arresting nor smelt sweeter than when it was about to be harvested. The summer heat brought out the rich essence and the colour was at its deepest, having changed from the mauve spikes of spring into sprays of violet florets. I was sad knowing that in a few days the fields would be reduced to clumps of butchered shrubs.

My father leaned on his walking stick and assigned each of the workers a section while Uncle Gerome brought the cart and mule down to the field. The workers took a truss each from my father, knotting it at the corners and turning it into a belt bag in which they could gather the cut stalks.

The boy went to sit under a tree. I picked up Olly and called over Chocolat. 'Would you like to pat them?' I asked him, placing Olly by his side.

He reached out and stroked their heads. Chocolat licked the boy's fingers and Olly put his chin on his lap. The boy giggled and smiled at me. I pointed to my chest and said, 'Simone', but he either didn't understand what I was saying or was too shy to tell me his name. I looked at his large eyes and decided to call him Goya, because I thought he seemed sensitive, like an artist.

I sat down next to him and we watched the workers spread out in the fields. I didn't know how to speak Spanish to ask Goya the workers' real names, so I made some up for them from the few Spanish names I knew. The lanky Spaniard I called Rafael. He was the youngest and had a strong chin, straight eyebrows and good teeth. He was handsome and strutted about as if he knew all about lavender cutting, but every so often he would turn to look at Rosa — the name I had given to the woman — to see what she was doing. The stocky man I called Fernandez.

He could have been Uncle Gerome's twin. Both men lunged at the shrubs the way a bull charges a matador. The other Spaniard was the father of Goya, a gentle giant who followed his own path and approached the harvest without fuss. He was the one who had so lovingly held the guitar. I called him José.

Aunt Yvette stepped back through the lavender and towards us. 'We'd better get started on the food,' she said.

I stood up and brushed the grass off my dress. 'Do you think he would like to come?' I asked, pointing to Goya. Chocolat was nestled against the boy's shoulder and Olly was asleep in his lap. Goya stared at the wisps of platinum hair sticking out from under my aunt's hat. I was so used to her appearance that I forgot people were surprised the first time they saw an albino.

'He thinks you're a fairy,' I told her.

Aunt Yvette smiled at Goya and patted his head. 'He looks happy where he is, and I think it pleases his mother to be able to see him.'



In the evening, we ate dinner in the yard that separated our two farmhouses, and stayed there after darkness fell. The air was thick with the essence of lavender. I swallowed and tasted it at the back of my throat.

My mother was stitching one of my father's shirts, her handiwork illuminated by a hurricane lamp. For some reason known only to herself, she always made repairs to clothes with red thread, as if the snags and tears were wounds in the fabric. My mother's hands were laced with cuts, but harvesters never bothered about minor wounds. The essential oil was a natural disinfectant and cuts healed within days.

Aunt Yvette read *Les Misérables* with me. The village school had closed two years earlier, when the railway was extended and many people moved to the towns, and without her interest in my education I might have ended up



as illiterate as the rest of my family. Uncle Gerome could read ledger books and fertiliser instructions but my mother couldn't read at all, although her knowledge of herbs and plants was as extensive as a pharmacist's. Only my father could read the newspaper. It was because of what he'd read in it in 1914 that he went to fight in the Great War.

'The revellers continued to sing their songs,' I read out loud, 'and the child, under the table, also sang hers —'

'*Bof!*' scoffed Uncle Gerome, picking at his teeth with a knife blade. 'All right for some to read useless books, especially when they don't break their backs in a field all day.'

My mother's hands stopped moving and our eyes met. The muscles in her neck tensed. My aunt and I leaned closer to her, picking up the end of the cloth and pretending to study it. Although none of us could confront Uncle Gerome, we always came to each other's aid when one of us was mocked. Aunt Yvette couldn't work in the fields because of her skin condition. An hour in the southern sun and she would have had third-degree burns. She was from the town of Sault, and the superstition surrounding albinos was the only reason I could see why a bright, attractive woman would have been married off to Uncle Gerome. He was shrewd enough to know that what she didn't contribute as a farm worker she more than made up for as a cook and a housekeeper, but I had never heard him acknowledge her merits. As for me, I was simply unsuited to harvesting. They called me 'the flamingo' because my skinny legs were twice as long as my body, and even my father, with his one eye and lame leg, could clear a field faster than I could.

Laughter burst from the barn. I wondered where the Spaniards found the energy for joviality after a day in the fields. The sound of a guitar floated across the yard. I imagined José strumming the instrument, his eyes full of passion. The others kept the beat, clapping their hands and keening in flamenco style.

Aunt Yvette glanced up then turned back to the novel. Uncle Gerome reached for a blanket and tucked it around

his head, play-acting his dislike of the music. My father stared at the sky, lost in his own thoughts. My mother kept her eyes focused on her handiwork, as if she were deaf to the sounds of celebration. Her posture from the waist up was so erect that she resembled a statue. My eyes drifted to under the table. She had slipped her feet out of her shoes and one foot was tapping out a sensual rhythm, rising and falling in a dance of its own. Her deception reminded me that my mother was a woman full of secrets.

While photographs of Grand-père and Grand-mère Fleurier were displayed on our mantelpiece, there were no pictures of my maternal grandparents anywhere in the house. When I was a child, my mother showed me the hut where they had lived at the base of a hill. It was a simple stone and wood structure that had lasted until a forest fire and a violent mistral swept through the gorge in the same year. Florette, the postmistress from the village, told me that my grandmother was so famous for her remedies that even the mayor's wife and the old *curé* used to turn to her when conventional medicine or prayer failed. She said that one day my grandparents, who were then middle-aged, appeared in the village with my mother. The enchanting girl, who they named Marguerite, was already three years old the first time the villagers saw her. Although the couple swore that the child was theirs, there were many who believed my mother was the abandoned child of gypsies.

The mystery surrounding her origins and the rumours of her own healing ability did not endear my mother to the strict Catholic household of the Fleuriers, who had opposed the marriage of their favourite son. Yet no one could deny that it was my mother who had nursed my father back to health when all the army doctors had given him up for dead.

The Spaniards continued their singing long after Uncle Gerome and Aunt Yvette had returned to their house and my parents and I had retired to our beds. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling beams and feeling the sweat run down the hollows of my ribs. The moonlight through the cypress

trees created wave-like shadows on my wall. I imagined the shapes were dancers moving to the sensual music.

I must have fallen asleep because I sat up with a start some time later and realised that the music had stopped. I heard Chocolat bark. I slid out of bed and looked out the window into the yard. A breeze had cooled the air and the silvery light splashed over the roof tiles and buildings. I glanced towards the wall at the end of the garden and blinked. A ring of people danced there. They moved silently, without music or singing, their arms sweeping over their heads and their feet stamping to an unheard rhythm. I peered into the night and recognised José dancing with Goya on his shoulders, the boy's white-toothed smile a gash in his dark face. My own heels lifted from the floor. I had the urge to run downstairs and join them. I gripped the window frame, not sure if the dancers were really the Spaniards or evil spirits disguising themselves to trick me to my death. The old women in the village spoke of such things.

My heart skipped a beat.

Apart from Goya, there were five dancers: three men and two women. My mouth fell open when I glimpsed the long dark hair and fine limbs of the second woman. Fire smouldered under her skin and sparks flew from her feet where they touched the ground. Her dress flowed around her like a stream. My mother. I opened my mouth to call to her but found myself stumbling back towards my bed, overcome by sleep again.

When I opened my eyes, the first light of day was breaking. My throat was dry. I squeezed my palms over my face, unsure if what I had seen had been real or a dream.

I pulled on my dress and tiptoed down the stairs and past my parents' room. My mother and father were asleep. I may not have inherited my mother's powers but I did have her curiosity. I crept to the edge of the yard, near the wall where the almond trees grew. The grass was tall with summer and undisturbed. I glanced over the trees and plants for evidence of intrusion, but found none. There were no tied twigs, no fragments of bone, no sacred stones.

No signs of magic at all. I shrugged and turned to go, but as I did something flashed in the corner of my eye. I reached out and touched the lower branch of a tree. Caught over one of the leaves was a single red thread.



My aunt's pale skin and my long legs did not spare us the work involved in distilling. My father and Uncle Gerome, their faces twisted with exertion, winched a steaming tube of compacted lavender stalks out of the still. My mother and I rushed forward to poke the mound with our pitchforks. We spread the stalks out on mats before dragging them into the sunshine to dry.

'There's no time to lose,' my father told us. 'With the new still we can use those stalks for fuel when they are dry.'

My mother and I turned the cut lavender to prevent it from fermenting, while Aunt Yvette helped the men pack the next load into the still. When it was full my father told me to jump on top of it to compress the stalks and 'bring us good luck!'

'She's too skinny to make a difference,' Uncle Gerome scoffed, but reached out his arms to help me into the still anyway. 'Mind the sides,' he warned, 'they are burning hot.'

They say lavender is a mood enhancer; I wondered if the delicious scent wafting through the air had managed to improve even Uncle Gerome's disposition.

I stomped down the lavender, not minding the scratches on my legs or the heat. If my father and Bernard's plan to harvest and distil lavender commercially worked out, my father would be able to reclaim his part of the farm. With each stamp of my foot, I imagined that I was helping him take a step closer to his dream.

After Uncle Gerome had helped me out of the still and sealed the lid, my father pulled himself down the ladder to the lower floor. I heard him stoke up the fire. 'I can tell from the first load that the oil is good,' he beamed when he returned.

Uncle Gerome rubbed his moustache. ‘Good or not, we’ll see if it sells.’

At midday, after the fourth load, my father called a break. We dropped onto the damp straw or sank to our haunches. My mother soaked pieces of cloth in water and we pressed them against our burning faces and palms.

A motorcar sounded outside and we went into the yard to greet Bernard. In the passenger seat was Monsieur Poulet, the village mayor and manager of the local café. In the rear sat Monsieur Poulet’s sister, Odile, with her husband, Jules Fournier.

‘*Bonjour! Bonjour!*’ Monsieur Poulet called, stepping out of the car and wiping his face with a handkerchief. He was wearing the black suit he kept for official occasions. It was a size too small and pinched his shoulders, making him look like a shirt pegged on a line.

Odile and Jules stepped out of the car and everyone moved inside the distillery. Monsieur Poulet and the Fourniers studied the still which was much larger than the ones that had been used in the region for years. Although they were not farmers, they had an interest in the success of our venture. With so many people leaving Pays de Sault for the towns, they hoped that the lavender would bring back business to our village.

‘I’ll get a bottle of wine,’ said Aunt Yvette, turning towards the house. Bernard said that he would help her with the glasses. I watched them walk up the path, their heads close together. Bernard said something and Aunt Yvette laughed. My father had explained to me that Bernard was a good person who wasn’t interested in women in the usual way, but he was so gentle with Aunt Yvette that sometimes I wondered if he was in love with her. I glanced at Uncle Gerome, but he was too busy boasting about the new still’s capacity to notice.

‘It is the type of still that is being used by the large distilleries in Grasse,’ he said. ‘It’s more efficient than the portable ones we’ve been using.’

From the way he was talking, anyone would have

thought the still had been his idea. But he was the financier, not the dreamer: he had provided the money for the expensive still and would take half the profits. But my father and Bernard had calculated that if three successive lavender crops were good, the still would be paid off in two years and the farm in another three.

Odile sniffed the air and sidled up to me. 'The oil smells good,' she whispered. 'I hope it makes us all rich and gets your father out of debt.'

I nodded but said nothing. I knew too well the shame of my family situation. The land had been divided between the two brothers on the death of my grandfather. When my father was away at war, Uncle Gerome lent my mother money to keep our farm going. But when my father returned maimed, and the meagre war pension was not enough to pay off the debts, Uncle Gerome reclaimed my father's half. After my father recovered, Uncle Gerome said he could buy his farm back in instalments with interest each year. It was a shameful thing to do within the family, when even the poorest in our village had left baskets of vegetables on our doorstep while my father was sick. But you could never say a word about his older brother to my father. 'If you had seen how our parents treated him, you would understand,' he always said. 'I can't remember either of them giving him one word of kindness. He reminded our father too much of his own father. From the time Gerome was a boy, he only had to look at our father to get a boxing around the ears. By rights, the entire farm should have been his, yet for some reason our parents always favoured me. Don't worry, we will buy our share back.'

'Who else will be bringing you their lavender to distil?' Jules asked my father.

'The Bousquets, the Nègres, the Tourbillons,' he answered.

'The others will come too when they see how profitable it is,' said Uncle Gerome, sticking out his chin as if he were imagining himself a successful distiller-broker. Monsieur

Poulet raised his eyebrows. Perhaps he thought Uncle Gerome was imagining himself as the new mayor.

My mother's face pinched into a scowl and I could guess what she was thinking. It was the first time Uncle Gerome had sounded positive about the success of the project. While he would be taking half the profits, my father was taking all the risks. Our farm had been turned over almost entirely to lavender while Uncle Gerome was still planting oats and potatoes. 'In case it doesn't work out and I end up having to feed you all,' he'd told us.



When the lavender harvest was over, the driver returned with the wagon to take the workers to another farm. I stood in the yard and watched the Spaniards load their belongings. It was the same process as the morning they had arrived, only in reverse. Rafael hoisted up sacks and trunks to Fernandez and José, who crammed them towards the front of the wagon so they could sit at the back and keep the load balanced. When all was packed, José picked up his guitar and strummed a melody while the driver finished the wine my aunt had poured out for him in a tall glass.

Goya danced around his mother's legs. I took the lavender sachet I had kept in my pocket during the harvest and gave it to him. He seemed to understand that the gift was to bring him luck and pulled a piece of string from his own pocket and looped it through the ribbon. When he was lifted on top of the wagon to sit with his mother, I saw that he was wearing the sachet around his neck.



If Uncle Gerome had had any doubts about the profitability of the oil, they were dispelled a few days later when, on Bernard's recommendation, a company in Grasse bought the entire yield.

‘It’s certainly the best-quality oil I’ve come across in years,’ Bernard said, laying the bill of sale on the kitchen table. My father, mother, aunt and I gasped when we saw the amount scrawled at the bottom of the note. Unfortunately Uncle Gerome was out in the fields and we didn’t have the pleasure of seeing his surprise.

‘Papa!’ I cried, throwing my arms around his neck. ‘Soon we will have the farm back and then we will be rich!’

‘Goodness,’ said Bernard, covering his ears. ‘I never knew that Simone had such a loud voice.’

‘Didn’t you?’ said my mother, her eyes twinkling with laughter. ‘The night she was born, her grandmother declared she had an extraordinary lung capacity and predicted that she would be a singer.’

Everybody laughed. Underneath her reserve my mother had a mischievous sense of humour. And just to give her back what she was handing out, I stood on my chair and sang ‘*À la claire fontaine*’ at the top of my voice.



Every month my father made a trip to Sault to buy supplies that we couldn’t get in the village and to sell some of our produce. My father handled the mule and cart well on the farm, despite his missing eye, but the road to Sault was slippery limestone rock and ran alongside the precipices of the Gorges de la Nesque. Any error of perspective could be fatal. In October, Uncle Gerome was busy with his flock of sheep so our neighbour, Jean Grimaud, agreed to accompany my father. He needed to buy some harnesses and rope in town.

The morning mist was disintegrating when I helped my father load the almonds he would sell in town into the cart. Jean called out to us from the road and we watched his giant figure make its way towards us. ‘If Jean were a tree he would be an oak,’ my father always said. Indeed, Jean’s arms were thicker than most people’s legs and his hands



were so large that I was sure he could crush a rock between his palms if he wanted to.

Jean pointed to the sky. 'Do you think there might be a storm?'

My father considered the few wispy clouds floating overhead. 'If anything, I think it might be hot. But you can never tell this time of year.'

I stroked the mule while my mother and aunt gave my father a list of supplies to buy for the house. Aunt Yvette pointed to something on the list and whispered in his ear. I turned towards the hills, pretending that I hadn't noticed. But I knew what they were talking about; I'd listened in on a conversation between Aunt Yvette and my mother the previous night. My aunt wanted to buy material to make me a good dress for going to church and for trips into town. I knew that she wanted me to have a different life to hers. 'A man who truly loves a woman respects her mind,' she often told me. 'You are intelligent. Never marry beneath yourself. And don't marry a farmer if you can help it.' While my father always said that I could choose a husband for myself whenever I thought the time was right, I suspected that Aunt Yvette had the sons of the doctor or notaries in Sault in mind for me. I wasn't at all interested in boys, but I was interested in a new dress.

Uncle Gerome appeared in the yard in his leather leggings with a hunting gun over his shoulder. 'Careful on the road,' he warned my father. 'The rains have washed some of it away.'

'We'll take it slow all right,' my father promised him. 'If we think we won't get back before dark, we'll stay overnight.'

Autumn in Provence was as beautiful as spring and summer. I imagined my father and Jean travelling past the jade pine forests and the flames of Virginia creeper. I would have liked to go with them but there wasn't enough room. The men waved us farewell and we watched the cart bump and sway down the road. My father's voice rang out in the air:

*Those mountains, high mountains  
That fill the skies  
Stand up to hide her  
From my longing eyes.*

My mother and aunt headed back towards Aunt Yvette's kitchen, which we used more than our own because it was bigger and had a wood-fired stove. I followed them, completing the last verse of my father's song:

*The mountains are moving  
And I see her clear  
And I'll soon be with her  
When my ship draws near.*

I thought about what my mother had said about my grandmother's prediction that I would be a singer. If that were true, then I could only have inherited my talent from my father. His voice was as pure as an angel's. Bernard said that when they were knee-deep in mud in the trenches, with the smell of death all around them, the men used to ask my father to sing. 'It was the only thing that gave us hope.'

I scraped my boots and pushed open the kitchen door. My mother and aunt were setting out porcelain bowls on the workbench. There was a basket of potatoes near the table and I sat down and began to peel them. My mother grated a block of cheese while my aunt chopped garlic. They were going to make my favourite dish, *aligot*: puréed potatoes, cheese, sour cream, garlic and pepper, all stirred into a savoury mash.

With Uncle Gerome out hunting, we were free to be ourselves. While we cooked my aunt told stories from books and magazines she'd read and my mother recounted village legends. My favourite one was the story about the *curé* who became senile and arrived at church naked one morning. I sang for them and they applauded. I loved my aunt's kitchen, with its mixture of orderliness and clutter. The woodwork was imbued with

the scents of olive oil and garlic. Cast-iron pots and copper saucepans of every size hung from beams above the fireplace, which was blackened from years of use. A convent table stood in the middle of the room, its benches laid with cushions that sent up puffs of flour whenever somebody sat on one. Mortars and pestles, water jugs and straw baskets lined with muslin were scattered on every spare shelf or bench.

As my father had predicted, by midday the weather was hot and we sat at the table in the yard to enjoy our little feast. But in the afternoon, when I went to collect water from the well, the clouds were beginning to cast grim shadows over the valley.

‘Just as well they took wet-weather clothes with them,’ observed Aunt Yvette, throwing the potato skins to the chickens. ‘They must be on their way back by now. If the storm breaks they will be soaked through.’

A light rain began to drizzle but the clouds in the direction of Sault were more sinister. I sat by the kitchen window, willing my father and Jean a safe journey home. There had been a sudden downpour the day I went with my father and Uncle Gerome to the Lavender Fair in August, and one of the wheels of our cart had become embedded in mud. It took us three hours to free it and get moving again.

A flash of lightning buckled across the sky. The clap of thunder that followed made me jump.

‘Come away from the window,’ said Aunt Yvette, reaching out to close the shutters. ‘Watching the road won’t bring them here any faster.’

I did as she said and took a seat at the table. My mother was slumped in her chair, staring at something. I looked over my shoulder and saw that the clock on the mantelpiece had stopped. My mother was as pale as a sheet.

‘Are you all right, Maman?’

She didn’t hear me. Sometimes I thought she was like a cat, vanishing into the shadows, able to see but not be seen, only reappearing from the darkness when she willed it.

‘Maman?’ I whispered. I wanted her to speak, to offer me some word of hope, but she was as silent as the moon.

At dinner Uncle Gerome stabbed his vegetables and tore his meat. ‘They must have decided to stay in town,’ he muttered.

Aunt Yvette assured me that Uncle Gerome was right, and the men had decided to stay the night in the cartwright’s barn or the blacksmith’s shed. She made me a bed in one of the upstairs rooms so I wouldn’t have to run out in the rain to get to my own house. My mother and Uncle Gerome sat by the fire. I could tell by Uncle Gerome’s gritted teeth that he didn’t entirely believe in his own supposition.

I lay in bed listening to the rain on the roof tiles and softly sang to myself. I must have fallen asleep soon afterwards because the next thing I knew there was a loud banging on the kitchen door. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. The mule was there in the rain but there was no sign of the cart. I heard voices downstairs and hurriedly dressed.

Jean Grimaud was standing near the door, dripping water onto the flagstones. There was a gash across his forehead and blood was oozing into his eyes. Uncle Gerome was as grey as a stone.

‘Speak!’ he said to Jean. ‘Say something.’

Jean looked at my mother with tortured eyes. When he opened his mouth to speak and nothing came out, I knew. There was nothing to be said. Father was gone.