

*B*urning Silk





PART ONE



THE SEDUCTION OF SCENT

Chapter One



IN THE MOUTH OF THE BEAST

April–May 1829, Grasse, France

Monsieur Fournier had arranged to meet Catherine in the drawing room of the Roubigant mansion before dinner; she would not be late for her first assignment at France's legendary *parfumerie*. The butler advised her that Monsieur would be delayed a few minutes, news that stoked her *nervosité*.

After the tall doors closed, sealing her into the drawing room, she made a circuit of the room to distract herself. A smokeless fire snapped in the fireplace at the far end, two carved chairs drawn up in front of it, a round table between. Along the walls, several more chairs stood sentinel. Black and white engravings on the walls illustrating famous royal gardens of France would have held her attention but for the dim and flickering light.

A strange room, she thought, entirely without flowers or decorations, the furniture bare, the ambience austere. And not at all in the way French elegance can appear austere.

Eighteen years old, Catherine Duladier had not yet seen the true austerity of a Quaker household in the New World. And, aside from a trip six years earlier to Provence and Languedoc to view the graveyards of her family's Huguenot *patrimoine*, and what she had seen in the books sent by associates in the silk guild, together with what her family had told her of the world, the young apprentice in the silk trade had seen very little outside of her home on the Main River near Mainz.

She warmed her hands before the fire, and then, finding a full-length mirror set into the wall, she pirouetted, making sure that her petticoats were revealed at precisely the margin permitted by post-Napoleonic French fashion. *You are quite the young maîtresse de la soie*, she assured herself while her lifted eyebrow appraised the total effect.

Catherine was determined not to be intimidated by anything that occurred at Roubigant. *Hauteur*—that arrogance the French are born with—would be her shield, bolstered by her family's reputation as Huguenot silkmakers whose name had survived the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes more than a century earlier. Not even the gimlet eyes of these citizens of the Côte d'Azur, she vowed, would pierce her façade, expose her quivering insecurities.

What if this Monsieur Le Fournier questioned her suitability? "Why has your family sent a girl to consult France's leading fragrance manufacturer?" he might ask. The House of Duladier, which enjoyed undisputed hegemony in the European silkmakers guilds, passed on the secrets of their superior craftsmanship from one generation to the next in an unbroken chain, mother to daughter. As the beneficiary of her family's legacy—her training as a *maîtresse de la soie*—Catherine's position was unassailable: she merited this distinction. Consulting Roubigant was entirely within her capabilities.

Surely with his own mother being a silk *maîtresse*, M. Le Fournier would understand the subtleties of the silk guild. In their world, men cultivated mulberry, the silkworm's preferred food, and they also

handled the merchant affairs of the outside world. It remained the women's millennial responsibility to shepherd silkworms from seed to *cocon*, for there, in each *cocon*, a kilometer of unbroken silk thread lay neatly wound for dyers and weavers to interpret. Moreover, Catherine was prepared because she had been initiated by her mother, the uncompromising Hannah Duladier.

Catherine bolstered herself with these facts, and yet . . . When the family had discussed sending Catherine to Grasse to represent them, she had overheard her cousin Wilhelm argue, "Are you mad? She is fragile, untried, naïve to the world. They will eat her for lunch." This last, rendered in pithy Hessian, defied translation.

If she failed over the next fortnight, their banker, their Rothschild, might limit or even recall the family's line of credit, for the Rothschilds were bankers to the House of Roubigant as well. The House of Duladier's plans to send Catherine and her sister Elisabeth to the New World, their hope to establish their dominance in domestic silk production in the central Atlantic states, could wither right here, before she reached her majority.

Whatever will be, already is. Summoning every ounce of self-possession she had, falling back on her discipline, Catherine closed her eyes and straightened her spine while her thoughts slid back and forth like panicked mice: *What if, what if, what if.*

She focused and diagnosed her state. *My heart is beating like a hawk against the bars of a cage; my breathing is fast, too shallow to fill my lungs.* Following her training, she labelled her thoughts—*fear, insecurity*—and then dismissed them, drew breath into her lungs, expelled it through her nose. Twice, three times a charm. Her senses opened like a rosebud. She could hear the offshore wind rising in the sycamores that lined the driveway, feel the harsh cry of a hunting falcon high on the gyre, taste the spice of the dusty *garrigue* that gave wines, cheeses, and perfumes of this area of southern France their distinct character, their *terroir*.

She summoned La Madonne Noire, calling on the ancient alliance

the women of the silk had developed with the Black Madonna, a devotion their Protestant brethren would not have understood, older than Christianity, older than the Sects. *Please. S'il te plaît. Aide-moi. Help me.*

She waited. *I am not alone . . .* The beginnings of the prayer rose in her mind like the first bead in a rosary. The whispers of fear gathered to a high rushing wind that threatened to shred the tenuous connection. Stubbornly, Catherine pressed back against the clamor of anxiety.

J'ai besoin de ton aide. I need you. Tell me I'm not alone.

Even with her eyes closed, she could feel the change in the room. The temperature dropped; the sudden chill bathed her skin in goose-flesh that lifted every hair on her body.

Sparks began to float behind her closed lids.

Are you here with me? she asked in Dialog, the mother of all tongues.

From all of the women of the silk who listened in, the answer came, in a soothing litany. *We are always. We are everywhere.* Then, the counsel she could use: *Follow the teachings. Listen for our voice.*

The power of the combined *logos* of her female line, this internal channel they called Dialog, had evolved over millennia of working in the silk, first in Asia, and from there in an unbroken line to European silkworms. Through Dialog, a *maitresse* working at a distance and in need of counsel could call on the accumulated wisdom of her sisterhood.

Opening her eyes, she looked around. She was still alone. The fire snapped on the hearth. "Thank you, La Noire," she whispered.

She seated herself in one of the chairs, arranged her skirts to present a pleasing picture, and reviewed what she knew.

Roubigant had contacted the Rothschild, the Duladier family's banker, in his Frankfurt office. "Their chief *parfumeur* refuses to move on to the next project" were the exact words their Rothschild told Catherine's father. "Roubigant says Le Fournier is obsessed."

Apparently the Great Nose had a quest: to replicate the perfume of the female silkmoth and strengthen it for detection by the human nose. Their Rothschild made his wishes clear: one of Hannah's *maîtresses de la soie* from the House of Duladier would travel to the south of France to consult with Le Fournier. By the process of elimination, Catherine had been the only *maîtresse* available to travel in the spring season.

Their Rothschild had made it clear how important this consult would be to his own investments, and thus to their own fortunes. Roubigant's reputation, founded on the scented gloves it created for Napoleon and Josephine's court, was now based on the complex floral perfume *Quelques Fleurs*. Though their preeminence was unchallenged, it was clear to everyone involved that Roubigant had better unveil a new scent sensation soon, and not only to an expectant nobility but also to their *schattenseite*, the *demi-monde* of actors and pages, of milliners and pretenders. A new sensation—or Roubigant's star would begin to plummet, for that was the way of the world.

The House of Duladier had its spies, who had reported from Roubigant's directors' meeting on the Cote d'Azur. Moving their chief *parfumeur*, Monsieur Le Fournier, off his highly unprofitable obsession proved to be a heated topic of discussion among the trustees of Roubigant's future.

"Perhaps he is onto something!" one speculated. "Let's not kill the golden goose."

"On the other hand," another insinuated, "isn't that hypothesis of his more than a bit daft? The scent of a silkmoth!"

"It's so clearly about his mother, isn't it obvious?" a third wise-cracked. "She heads up a small silk operation right here, am I right? That's what this is about. It's costing us plenty to bring the House of Duladier all the way from Germany. Procuring him a wife or a mistress would be cheaper. Bring him before us, so we can give him the rough side of our tongue, the sissy!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen." It was not easy gathering the directors

twice a year, even though the meeting was held in Biarritz to make the obligation less onerous, and the chairman wanted to move past the issue. "Let's not malign the Great Nose. His putative celibacy pays out for us in *ducats*. I don't need to remind you how much Quelques Fleurs has made for us. Now, can we move on?"

The chairman had been candid in his report to Auguste Duladier, and while Auguste and Hannah had included Catherine in this briefing, they withheld a deeper level of their deliberations from their daughter. Ordinarily, the goings-on at Roubigant would have occasioned great hilarity among them, but this was a serious matter. Le Fournier was entirely too close to one of the silk guild's deepest secrets! The ancient chemistry between a silk *maitresse* and her charges could not be anatomized any more than tearing open a chrysalis could reveal the secrets of metamorphosis.

Auguste and Hannah planned to make a fool of this man, using Catherine as bait, yet leaving Roubigant with an entirely serviceable scent to take to market, to placate their Rothschild. It was necessary for Auguste and Hannah to appear cavalier about taking the assignment; it was part of their trap. Because the Great Nose was besotted with the barnyard side of silk, his senses could be beguiled. Auguste predicted his fall to their Rothschild obliquely, guaranteeing that Le Fournier would not be holding up developments at Roubigant much longer. "Catherine," he assured their banker, "will help lead Le Fournier to an evocative new fragrance, something utterly *fraiche*. How could she not?"

Hannah and Auguste, each other's sole confidantes, were in complete agreement. Catherine's innocence was her strength. Powerful and guileless, she would take this Nose down a peg. If she followed their directions, he would be defanged; discredit the man's hypothesis to his associates behind his back, throw the Nose himself a few scraps, lead him on to "discover" a new fragrance.

It was clear to both of the Duladiers, twin pillars of their daughter's world and their own business: Catherine could not be fully aware

of the seriousness of her mission. She simply wasn't that good of an actress. Let her be genuinely surprised when Le Fournier revealed his hand. She could be trusted not to reveal their deepest secrets. If she only followed their directions, the man would be snared.



As she sat in front of the fire in Grasse on an April evening, Catherine's review of her instructions did nothing to build her confidence. *Lead him on, throw him scraps . . . Whatever did that mean?* She took out a linen square from her reticule and began to twist it, expelling air from the bottom of her lungs with the same squeezing force, in a pulsing rhythm that never failed to clear her head.

When Le Fournier walked into the room, sporting a telltale ring around his eye, Catherine could see that he had been watching her from a peephole, a not uncommon practice stolen from houses of ill-repute and used by merchants and bankers to observe their customers. When she was a child visiting the bank with her father, their Rothschild had showed her the bank's peepholes, giving her an excellent object lesson in the necessity for subterfuge when large sums of money were involved.

Le Fournier is not a natural player, though he works hard at it, she thought. *Check.* She was relieved that she had not been biting her nails for his observation. *Gloves.* She smiled. She was already ahead of this game.

Moving from the ring around his eye, she was startled to note that his bushy eyebrows called to mind the furry antennae of the Imago, the male silkmoth. His Gallic nose was almost a beak, capable of sucking in volumes of air when he was classifying a scent, on the trail of a missing ingredient. She knew that the French correlated nose size and genitalia. *Bouf! It means nothing*, she suspected.

She resolved not to underestimate this man, and yet the air of ridiculousness that hung over him—so at odds with his self-importance—

presented her with a challenge. She scanned him, looking for the source of his weakness. Was it pride? Had his mother wounded him? Aside from a premature bald spot, she saw nothing else that would account for his incongruous clownish air.

He had clearly been prepared for her French accent, debased, as he would consider it, by Hessian gutturals. "Welcome to Roubigant, Mademoiselle," he spoke slowly, precisely, as if she might not understand fluent French. If he didn't understand that French was her mother tongue, what else might he not understand? He bent over her gloved hand, pretending to kiss it, while his large, practiced nostrils flexed and drew in the scent from her wrist, from the skin on her hand, from her lap. Standing up, he kept his eyes closed for a fraction of a second, computing her sexual state, her menstrual cycle, and the messages of the natural smell of her skin. She felt like a specimen, a moth impaled on a pin.

"Your hands. I can feel through your gloves that they are cold. Shall I add a log to the fire?" he asked.

Warming me will develop my scent. "Not necessary, Monsieur. Merci," she replied. She concluded—correctly—that here was a man completely besotted with bringing nearly undetectable smells to the threshold of human experience. Like many prodigies, he was flagrant in exercising his gift. *Yes, arrogance, pride.* She knew this much already, and yet, what had he learned about her?

She shivered, not with cold but with fear. Surely a man so alert to the invisible world of scent would be able to track her in the dark. If things got dangerous, were she to attempt to leave here, she could be pursued. Auguste, her father, had drawn her aside when she was about to enter the coach that would take her out of contact with her family, away to the south. "The moment you feel him, or anyone, trespassing the bounds of propriety, run!" Then he had smiled that Auguste smile of his, reassuring her: "My dear, I am sure it will not come to that." He had paused, no longer smiling. "But if it does . . ." He had pressed his index finger against her lower lip, commanding

her to remember. It was their private family sign for “*Fais attention! Pay attention!*” Catherine’s mother had trained her protégé to guard against her unfortunate tendency to drift.

Catherine lifted an eyebrow, considered Le Fournier, seeing the bloodhound in him, the plum flush of his skin. *He imagines that I don’t know what he is up to. Despite his ability to track me by smell, wherever I might hide, his immense arrogance blinds him,* she concluded. Buffing up his arrogance might not only blinker his eyes but baffle his nose as well.

He sat across from her, a face so ugly as to be almost attractive. *Like a Turk,* she thought: large lower lip, good hazel eyes, with thick lunettes hung from a string around his neck or kept tucked atop his head so they would be at hand. His hair was drawn back in a small queue. Young to be so bald on top. And that . . . *prehensile* nose. In a country of noses. In a flash of insight, she saw that he might be Arab, of a pale, freckled Levantine strain. That would account for his mother’s living here, on the lip of the Mediterranean basin, running a small silk operation. Had she raised her son alone?

He sat, with one leg, encased in white hose, stretched out at angles to the other, a current affectation of the courtier, and—without looking at her—asked, “Were you instructed not to wear perfume of any kind, Mademoiselle?”

“But of course I am wearing no perfume or cosmetics of any kind, Monsieur.” She gave him her huffiest approximation of *hauteur*, alarmed by the slight tremble in her final few words.

He observed her over his fingertips for more than a minute.

He is calculating the worth of what he has paid for, she thought, keeping her chin high. She could see he wanted to call her a liar. *What will I do then?* she wondered, her worst fears materializing. Tamping down her fear, she reminded herself of an article of their faith: *You will see what to do when the time comes.*

As she observed him, something changed in his eyes. Perhaps he was remembering her credentials. Who would he be calling a liar but

her entire prestigious family, along with the extended silk guild and the Rothschild besides? Having made these calculations, he came to the inevitable conclusion: she was telling the truth.

M. Le Fournier jumped to his feet. "Are you terribly hungry?" he asked, hovering over her.

"Not particularly." She had taken some bread and cheese with wine before her bath. And, if the maidservant they had assigned her, Gabrielle, was any good at reporting back to him, he knew this already.

"Would you consider coming directly to the laboratory to begin work?" he asked. "I will have them leave a cold supper in your room." At her assent, he rang the bellcord that hung at the edge of the room. After giving orders about supper to the butler, he added, "Please ask Monsieur Bouffier to join us in the laboratory." Taking Catherine by her elbow and leading her out of the room, he explained: "Bouffier is my chemist."

"The Roubigant labos," he said as they crossed the veranda of the guesthouse and stepped onto a crunching gravelled drive, "are built in a circle, the center open, like a mill wheel."

How she wished she were alone—yes, to drift! A fine, high wind rippled through a grove of mixed cypress, sycamore, and bay that lined the circular drive, releasing heady volatiles. From the village beyond, a violin squealed as if tortured, matching her stretched and taut nerves. If she were to walk out, she imagined she would encounter a wall of honeyed musk from yellow acacia, blooming now at crossroads in the south of France. *Is that an early cigale?* she wondered, its summery insect *brrr* calling to her.

Each of her senses, shuffling and melding themselves, remembered this place, this Provence, this *pays*, as if she had been raised here rather than in Hesse. She had been here once before, at twelve, a family pilgrimage through the cemeteries of their Huguenot heritage. *My ancestors!* she exulted. *I belong here.* The image of a stone lintel in Les Baux came to mind, the letters chiseled fresh and crisp as the stars overhead: *Post tenebras lux.* After darkness comes the light.

Le Fournier droned on in the background. This man wanted nothing more from conversation with women than for them to flatter him with little *moues* and curtsies and squeaks at the right moments in his orations, she concluded. The very definition of a bore. *He will be easy.* Then, discipline reasserting itself, she cautioned herself, *Stay focused. Measure heartbeat to footfall.* He still had her folded arm pressed into his side.

“...shaped like a mill wheel.” They reached the legendary *laboratoire parfumerie* and he released her to open the door. “Twelve *parfumeurs* occupy each thirty percent of the circle. Our pie-shaped office,” he said as he showed her through a main foyer, then along a platform that encircled a raked Japanese garden, “is divided again in half, one half for the *parfumeur*, who composes.”

They moved into his office, where he gestured toward a window set into an interior wall. “The other office—separated from me by a full window that opens and closes—” he demonstrated it in his enthusiasm, “. . . is reserved for the *chimiste* and his library of ingredients, his stills, burners, retorts . . .”

At that moment, the *chimiste* arrived, breathless and huffing, Monsieur Bouffier, short, moonfaced, stubby fingered. Set into a face tanned by the sun, M. Bouffier’s features—slashed expressive eyebrows, wide mouth, sharply defined sideburns—suggested an animated persona more Parisian than Provençal.

After a perfunctory introduction, Monsieur Bouffier went into his laboratory by a separate door. Sounds emanating from the adjoining window led Catherine to imagine him preparing to address the Nose’s compositions.

Catherine renewed her resolve to appear aloof yet *engagée*. *It simply will not serve*, she reminded herself, *to show these two men the measure of my inexperience.* Could she maintain this illusion of her importance in close quarters over fourteen days? *What to conceal, what reveal?* She couldn’t remember a word her parents had told her, aside from, “If you follow our instructions . . .”

M. Le Fournier offered her a light chair while he sat in his own chair, on wheels, in front of the bare surface of his rock maple worktable, which he told her he had imported from the Americas.

She scrutinized the satiny, straw-colored wood as closely as proximity would allow, as if the wood might reveal something about its native continent. *Where I will be maitresse, if only I succeed here*, she reminded herself. And yet, how would success define itself? She felt certain that, when she got back to her room and collected her thoughts, she would remember the objectives of her mission clearly. *I will write them down, meditate on them every night*. They seemed ambiguous. *Help me make it through this night, Madonna*, she bargained.

Clues to her survival were close at hand. La Madonne Noire would not leave her without guideposts, signs. Nighttime had obliterated the grounds outside the window, but recalling the view of the grounds from her bedroom earlier in the day—scythed grass broken only by a group of large rocks—Catherine remarked, “How strange it seems, Monsieur . . .” Her voice sounded rusty, unused; she cleared her throat, began again. “There are no gardens here at Roubigant. In Grasse, Europe’s center for growing lavender.”

“By design, Mademoiselle,” Le Fournier explained. He pointed out the window at the narrow end of his laboratory, which was set in the wall beside his office door. “Even the meditation garden is planted without any strongly scented grasses, shrubs, or trees. We cannot afford to be distracted or confused by gratuitous fragrances. Lavender—indeed all of our raw materials—are grown outside of the grounds, at some distance.”

The sound of running water in the meditation garden came clearly through the window, and something more: Monsieur Le Fournier was wrong. A strong scent of dried grasses was borne through the cracks between doors and windows and their jambs. This famous Nose had his blind spots.

Fais attention, she warned herself. Pay attention.

He was clearing his throat, arching his fingers against each other, a

spider dancing on a mirror. “Now, Mademoiselle. I have a . . . hypothesis. I’m sure Rothschild told your father about it. And he spoke with you, I presume.”

She nodded, giving nothing away. *How long can I get away with not speaking?* she wondered. *Because surely, the moment I speak . . .* She squelched her maddening insecurities. *You are the one with the secrets, she reminded herself. Ones that he wants.* Her father had taught her how to fish. “Play it out, Catherine. Then be ready to jerk when he takes the bait.”

Le Fournier pursed his wide lips, an interesting effect with that protruding lower lip and beetling brow, an effect that summoned up all the seriousness about him, even hunching his shoulders until Catherine could imagine them covered by a moth’s velvety cape. *Take note, Catherine, she warned herself. Careful, careful.*

He cleared his throat again. “My hypothesis . . .,” he said, flexing his hands out in front of him, cracking his knuckles.

Can I be making him nervous? she wondered. *I’m just a girl.*

“We,” he began, using the collegial “we”—“have evidence to suspect that the *maitresse* of the *magnanerie*—and you are a *maitresse de la soie*, Mademoiselle, yes?” he interrupted himself.

At her terse nod, he continued. “Very well then. Through a mystery we haven’t penetrated yet, we have evidence that a *maitresse* of your select sisterhood mimics the chemistry of her charges, the silkworms. And you have been taught this, yes? That when you are cold, the silkworm is cold. Yes? And, by the time your charges are breaking forth from their *cocons*—the ones who haven’t been stifled—a fully initiated *maitresse* will smell like the female moth—La Phalène—ready to mate. Hmm?”

The hairs pricked up on her arms; a shiver went through her body like a wave. She had been told they would have an intellectual *discursif*, a civilized rapport over flasks and essences. He had taken it so far from what had originally been stated as his hypothesis: that a *maitresse* would be able to help him recognize the scent of the mating

moth as his formulations drew closer. No, now he was voicing a dangerous truth, a deeply guarded secret of their guild. He was speaking about her body, her essence. She shivered again.

His words were soft, uninflected. “Thus, when the moth, the male, L’Imago, breaks from his chrysalis, he will be drawn to the smell of the female, La Phalène, who is also breaking from her *cocon*. The twin fragrance of the *maîtresse* intensifies his experience, his need to mate. Is this not so, Mademoiselle?”

A chain of facts were unfolding clearly in her: His mother is a *maîtresse de la soie*; his family belongs to the guild. He is betraying one of silk’s deepest secrets, known only by female initiates. *Do my parents know he knows this? Does he hope to pry the secret from me?*

Catherine sat straight up, an alarm spreading its message through her entire nervous system. *If the bounds of propriety are crossed, run!* “What is it exactly that you are proposing, Monsieur?” she asked curtly, half rising, implying that she was ready to walk out. *But what of the honorarium?* a voice inside her asked. Her payment for this work was already earmarked to support her family’s venture to the Americas, where she was to lead.

Head lowered, he raised one hand.

You’re in charge here, Catherine, she reminded herself, settling back into the chair. Despite evidence to the contrary, she was not a young maiden who could be swept along without her consent. She had powerful tools at her command. She represented a guild whose secrets had remained hidden, with good reason, for millennia. No one, but no one, could outrank her—or blackmail her—here! Not on the topic of *les imagines*, their silkmoths.

“Only this, Mademoiselle,” he responded equally stiffly, hinting at the possibility he might take offense. “No one is as familiar with and sensitive to the perfume of the female silkmoth as you. The assignment is a simple one and should be able to be concluded in the fortnight we have arranged to have with you. I will compose my closest

approximation of the silkmoth scent, then send my composition through that window . . .”

He had only restated his hypothesis, and yet he had revealed his hand.

He knows, she spoke in Dialog, asking for help.

Dialog, the silent communion from mind to mind between *mâitresses de la soie*, given to them by the Black Madonna, had developed for precisely this purpose: to aid daughters at a distance by giving them access to the accumulated esoterica of their female line.

His mother? But no maitresse would reveal this secret, not even to a lover or a son. Had he intuited it? Not for nothing was he known as Le Grand Nez. Could she throw him off the scent? Somehow guide this project back onto safe ground? Now she remembered her instructions: throw him scraps, distract, lead him on.

No answer came. Was everyone preoccupied, being *en magnanerie*? Were they listening in? Testing her? She fought back against her fears with the tools she had been schooled to exert: breath and sound. When she got back to her room, she would chant, compose herself, send a letter to her parents. Auguste could have a coach here within a few days.

I am not alone, she chanted internally, the beginning of the prayer to comfort those *mâitresses* who are tested in solitude. If he pursued the hypothesis as he had first stated it—that a silk *maitresse* mimicked the chemistry of the mating Phalène, their female moth—then she was in danger. He need only unlock the secrets of her body to get his scent.

Catherine’s mother, Hannah, had schooled her protégé in an arsenal of skills. Now, one came to mind, one that she had been practicing, one that did not come naturally to her—the power of wit to defuse.

Le Fournier gestured to the wall he shared with his partner. “. . . where Monsieur Bouffier will compound the fragrance and pass it back to me. Then I correct, change some relationships, ask him to

add certain subtleties. He compounds the latest version and passes it back to me. And so on." He lifted his brow, certain, she realized, that he had covered his original offensive words with this avalanche of information. "That's where you come in, Mademoiselle Duladier. You will smell the compounds, and when you think we are close, you will help us feel our way to the elusive *mélange*. Is that what you had understood?"

"Yes, of course," she replied. *Menteur! Liar!* She resolved to factor in his habitual dissembling. Then she tried her hand. "But Monsieur . . . I don't want us to start under false pretenses."

He leaned forward, spoke softly. "Are you equal to this assignment, Mademoiselle?"

Keeping her eyes on his, she untied her cape, let it slide down, turned her back to him. "Do you imagine I have wings tucked in here somewhere, Monsieur?" She smiled over her shoulder. Yes, she recalled, *distract*. "In a week or so, if my sense of the timing of silkmoth breeding here in the south is correct, you can speak directly to La Phalène. Ask *her* to help you. For I am a human woman, Monsieur, not a moth."

"Mademoiselle," he growled softly, "I hope you are not toying with me."

"I am also not a kitten to play with, Monsieur," she responded, showing her claws. Then, knowing that nothing insults a Frenchman so much as being ignored, she moved on. "Do you wish to begin now?" she asked, retying her capelet around her neck.

After a second's pause, he nodded his head once, then swiveled his chair to face the desk, his back to her. "I am preparing a formula, which Bouffier will synthesize. I would like you to evaluate our work. Tonight, Mademoiselle."

Blood flooded her head and belly, bringing flush and heat. *He is attempting to humiliate me.* She wouldn't permit it. *Does he imagine he has dismissed me? When he has given me no idea what I am to do or where I am to work! With whom does he think he is dealing?*

He lifted a hoop from his desk much like an embroidery hoop meant to stretch and hold silk taut, but smaller, as broad across as a teacup rim.

Everything I need is at hand. She scanned the room. A cupboard to the left of his worktable held trays made of heavy metal screening. Here, hoops like the one he held were stored, labels facing front, filed alphabetically. She read Amber, Balsam, Bergamot, Cedar . . . Running her eyes along the samples, she picked out Gardenia, Hyacinth, Heliotrope, Nicotiana. These were followed by rings in code: PX#L47A, PX#L47B, and so on.

“Aren’t essences often volatile, losing themselves in the air?” she asked, pointing to the storage trays of rings, proud to note that neither her demeanor nor her voice betrayed her.

He appeared surprised that she was still there, then said, “Of course many are volatile and degrade very quickly. These are all samples prepared over the last week. I work from the freshest samples, always, which our assistants collect from a sort of shopping list we give them. Certain other fragrances are more stable, particularly those from resins or powerful oils: cedar, ambergris. *Les disques* allow me to assess two or more fragrances together, *comme ça*.” He lifted two disks, marked Jasmine and Chinese Musk, smelled them, and then leaned over to wave them under her nose. “See?”

She did. The combined fragrance transported her. Night-blooming, white, waxy flowers. Powerful tropical storms she had only dreamed of. Her pupils dilated, nostrils flared.

“What is your favorite fragrance, Mademoiselle Duladier? May I guess?” He handed her the disk labelled Gardenia, his forehead lifted inquiringly.

“*Bien sur*, gardenia is one of my favorite scents,” she told him, reaching for the disk, still drunk on the jasmine and musk, all the while aware that gardenia must be every woman’s favorite. “I haven’t smelled it since I was in Provence last,” she gushed, wishing she could control herself as she drank in the rare aroma, marvelling that chemistry had

been able to extract the essence of this flower, of any flower, without losing its defining characteristics. *He is deliberately provoking you*, she warned herself.

She didn't hand the disk back but continued to waft it under her nose. This time, out of habit, she took a sharp look at the gauge of silk they were using, thinking that it must represent a small but significant market for the weaving guild in Lyon. The silk was an expensive specialty silk, eiderdown-proof. More than five hundred threads per inch, and of a finish meant to wick and hold moisture for a long time in ideal conditions.

"You like jasmine. Love gardenia . . . what woman doesn't?" he was saying in a low, seductive voice.

Does he know the effect the flower is having on me? she wondered. *Opening up the small mouths throughout my body to drink in the rare perfume?*

"But trust me—before you leave, we will find out what your favorite scent is, Mademoiselle. We will edge closer to it each day."

He has just threatened me, she thought dully, unable to take it all in, menace gathering in the shadows, in the corners, at the margins of his lips, chin . . . *Breathe, Catherine!* Three breaths and her head cleared. *He is using his voice to mesmerize me.* She took a sharper look at this man, then parried.

"Surely you know that *mâitresses* don't use scent, Monsieur. Just as with wine *négociants*, scent distracts from our work. The moths don't like it, become confused. *Mâitresses de la soie*—a negligible market for Roubigant—" she smiled to soften the irony, "don't have favorite scents."

She warned herself as her mother had warned her: *Be careful of double entendres. You are too inexperienced, Catherine, to play the game of wits without accidentally giving the wrong impression. Take shelter in the maiden as long as you can.*

"But you would know about your market better than I, Monsieur," she ventured.

He visibly relaxed and preened.

Yes. Flatter his pride. Plump his arrogance.

"Now this . . ." he picked up the disk that had been lying on his desk when they came in, ". . . steps close to my favorite scent." He lifted the silk to his nose and, taking several short draughts, held in the accumulated breath before releasing it, eyes closed.

"Many fragrances can only be smelled the first time," he said, huskily. "The brain becomes saturated with it, exhausted, but this . . ." And then, putting his nostrils against the taut silk again and then distending it with the probe of his nose, he breathed, this time deeply and fully.

"Ah, forgive me, Mademoiselle Duladier," he said. "I am an artist and cannot help myself." With a wry smile, he gave Catherine a courtly bow and then, turning his back to her, picked up a piece of manuscript paper, stuck his quill nib into his ink pot, and began writing a cryptic formula across the bright expanse of vellum in purple ink.

Does he expect me to disappear? She would insist on her contractual right to be informed. "May I?" she asked, reaching for the disk.

His hand closed protectively over it. He put up his quill and appeared to think. "Yes, why not." And then, turning his back to his desk and the beginnings of his formula, he gave her his close attention.

As if I were the experiment. She raised the disk to her nose to sniff as he had demonstrated, anxious to capture any essences that, like violet, would only manifest on the first smelling. As she moved it toward her nose, she saw the silk. The fact was, no one could hide anything from her regarding silk. Since her childhood, she had seen every silk manufactured in the entire world. When members of the Duladier family looked at a piece of silk, it stood naked before them; they saw all of its qualities: denier of the thread, conductivity of the strand, threads per inch, luster.

So who would doubt her? The circle of silk had been cut from the crotch of the underdrawers she had removed before her bath and sent, along with the rest of her travelling attire, to the laundry for cleaning

and refurbishing. Just to assure herself that she was not deluded, however, she brought the circle of silk to her nose, then flushed deeply as her own intimate musk greeted her with the eccentric signature only she knew. *Until now . . .*

Giving not the slightest hint that Catherine might have found him out, Le Fournier said, “There’s a faint odor of ammonia at the front of the fragrance. But when you smell through the sharp alarm of that, what lies beneath is quite complex.”

How dare he! Spastic, she threw the disk away from her to the floor, where it rolled under the desk. *Does he imagine I don’t recognize my own scent?* She needed to kick something. *Blind, he’s blind,* she realized. *What if I were to break his nose?* She looked around for something heavy enough, something within reach, then banked her fury. *I’ll be heading home first thing in the morning: no cheque, no client, no future.*

She recalled a snippet from the Old Text, an ancient book of silk wisdom, parts of which their sisterhood had memorized, as the original book had been lost in their diaspora in 1685, when the Edict of Nantes—granting Protestants religious tolerance within the larger Catholic society in France—had been revoked. *Don’t let yourself be trapped between your feelings and your duty to the silk.* The bounds of propriety had been crossed. She was at war with this man for the sake of her family and her guild. She feared for her own safety. Everything added up to justify her father’s warning: *Run.* And yet . . . This man had revealed his hand. She knew what he wanted. Shouldn’t that be sufficient to trap him?

“*Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle,*” Le Fournier said, making a whisking motion with his hands to indicate that she should back up. His aggrieved air implied that, furthermore, her clumsiness represented a great inconvenience for him, but he was prepared to overlook it.

As he got down on his hands and knees to root under his desk, his buttocks—tightly encased in those pants French men wore, tight and cinched at the knee—faced her, and the tails of his coat parted. She would let him know she was not prepared to have her person

violated. She flung over his chair, which narrowly missed hitting him just where she had wanted to aim her foot. If she injured him, she could claim it was an accident, couldn't she? *Then we would both know that I know. En garde.*

He scrambled to his feet. Regarding her, he used the fact that he had broken out in a sweat to cover the moment; he drew out his handkerchief and wiped the broad expanse of his forehead, the disk dangling from his other hand, limp at his side.

He righted his chair, examining it for injury. "Stagecoach palsy," he said, referring to the condition that afflicts travellers who have spent days jerking along uneven roads. "In the spring especially, after the rains," he said, babbling. "It will be gone within a day or so. You'll be back to normal." He placed the disk back on his desk, beside his vellum and quill, and avoided looking at her while he made minute adjustments to restore his upended complacency. "In the meantime, Mademoiselle, please be aware of your surroundings." He waved his hand, indicating a shelf of cut glass bottles, each filled with what he implied were rare perfumes.

Stalling for time, her conflicting emotions at war with each other, Catherine opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again, her training as an apprentice *maitresse de la soie* exasperating her: *Better say nothing than have nothing to say. But what could she say!* She rose, filled with rage and utterly confounded. She funneled all of her tumult into one sentence: "How can we have begun so badly, Monsieur?"

Perhaps his eyebrows lifted in surprise. Choosing to ignore what she had said, he took her hand in his, preparing to bow over it, a prelude to bidding her good night. Repelled by his touch, she jerked her hand away.

He sat back down and hunched over his manuscript, though he had yet to pick up the quill. "We will be arranging various outings during the fortnight that you are here, Mademoiselle Duladier," he said, as if negotiating a price with a *putain* he couldn't bear to see in the light

of day. "I hope you will understand," he went on stiffly, "that spending a great deal of time with us both in the laboratory and outside, at meals and at leisure, is part of your assignment. We don't intend to send you home to Frankfurt without showing you more of this part of France." He attempted a smile that manifested in a rictus of pain.

Surely he knows I am not from Frankfurt, and yet he seems to delight in repeating it. As if he were saying, "Sausage. Send you home to Sausage." She unclenched her fists. *Breathe.* Understanding flooded every cell of her body like a flush of shame. He felt that the honorarium had bought her, that he was entitled to study her in every situation, at every hour of the day. To invade her most private parts. Between her legs! She knew if she tried to speak, she would splutter.

Bought my time, brought me here to smell me, smell all my intimacies. So he can use me to find his treasure, something the women of France can dab on before spreading their legs, she thought, finding the unaccustomed crudeness as soothing as ointment, a habit her father indulged in defensively when utterly exasperated. Why is Dialog reserved only for women? I need Father. Now.

Then Le Fournier said—as if to himself—"Let's begin right there," and with that he took up his quill again and jabbed it fiercely into his inkwell.

She felt that jab between her legs; he meant her to. He knew she had meant to injure him with the chair. She heard it as surely as if it had been spoken: *There are no secrets here between us that words can hide.* They had smelled each other out.

She barely made it through the door and slammed it resoundingly. She almost fell off the platform into the raked sand of the meditation garden. She looked up to the open sky and stifled a sob. She had never been so violated. She lifted her arms, but the sacred posture only made her feel like she was hanging.

Mother! she cried in Dialog.

No response.

Have you abandoned me here?

She kicked the carefully raked pattern, spattering sand out from the toe of her boot.

She lifted her head to the sky, called again. *Mother!* Cassiopeia and the Seven Sisters sparkled, the same constellations that shone down on her family's home along the Main River, now framed by the round walls of this inner circle. *Surely you hear me!*

It was a mistake coming here, she said clearly in Dialog, violating one of the principles of communication, using the channel for negation, argumentation. Nothing stirred in the stars or in her inner ear. She started, *I am not alone . . .*, then faltered in the face of the dense, silent air.

"Like a mill wheel indeed," she said aloud as she stepped back onto the platform that led to the doors out of the complex. Trying them but finding them locked, she kicked in the bottom panel of one of the doors, hoping he heard it splinter, hoping he felt threatened. "You did not buy me!" she wanted to roar, bringing it all into the open.

"They are locked when one of us is in here working," a voice said from the darkness. "For security reasons." M. Bouffier stepped out from under a small tree in the garden. "I would like to have a smoke, but it is not allowed here." He hoisted himself up onto the platform, bent to press the splintered panel back into place. "Do you smoke?"

"I do," she admitted. "A clay pipe. How I wish I could have a smoke right now. Anything . . . a shot of brandy. Two."

She wanted to ask, "Did you hear us argue?" But perhaps it was best to pretend. *What would an adult do?* she wondered.

"*Gut!*" he said firmly. "I have been looking for a companion to have an occasional smoke with. And I often take a lonely brandy in my labo when time hangs heavy. Will you join me?" he asked, indicating the open door.

"We are locked in?" Her heart was beating like a trap drum; her tongue felt thick in her mouth. She had temporarily lost control over

her emotions, made worse by having no way out, and no outlet for her rampant anger. *The humiliation.* She raged inside. *How can I run if I am locked in?*

She wanted nothing more than to go to her room and write an urgent letter to her father. Auguste Duladier would send his carriage and a personal escort at once. She calculated—*I could be out of here in a week*—then as quickly deflated—*I am only here for a fortnight.* She hated to admit it, but it didn't make sense to leave for home. Moreover, she had limited resources to stay anywhere else until her father's emissary could arrive. *I'm trapped,* she thought.

"Would you care to come into the labo?" Bouffier asked again. "The Nose has the only key, and we have little choice but to wait it out," he said, spreading his hands and laughing a cynical yet helpless laugh.

He held the door to his lab for her, showed her to a chair. Sitting at his zinc-covered worktable, so much like a kitchen table, Bouffier began drawing Catherine out in German, easing her sickened feelings a bit with the appearance of normalcy, letting her calm herself while he talked. Bouffier set down two bottles, one with water, the other with the local brandy. He washed and then put out two short glasses, talking all the while. He told her that he had been raised in Lorraine, near his father's family.

She managed to respond: "Your French and German accents told me so." Her breathing was shallow, her voice high and thin. *Breathe! And blow.* She was practiced at applying her regimes surreptitiously.

He poured them each a glass of water and drank his down in two swallows. "It's so easy to dry out here in the spring," he said, encouraging her to drink the water before the brandy. "With the winds."

She drank, then reached across to pour herself another glassful. He waited until she had set her glass back on the worktable, then poured them each a half glass of brandy.

"Now," he counseled, lifting his glass. "We are to work together. Here. As I understand it." He lifted an eyebrow quizzically; she lifted her glass. "To the perfume we will create together, Mademoiselle!"

She drank, shuddering around the fire that burned all the way to her empty stomach, where it set up a glow.

“I have only my workbench,” he said, slapping its surface. They faced the window that led to Le Fournier’s office. The length of the lab, from its wide end where they sat to its narrow end at the door, was given over to a shadowy aisle flanked by deep shelves that reached the ceiling, shelves glinting with tins and precious glass and ceramic containers. “But I have made a place for you and your things.” He gestured toward a small table with a drawer in the same ell as his workbench, along an adjacent wall.

She surveyed it; the desk faced a window at the wide end of the room, with a view across the lawn in the daytime, she supposed. “It will do . . . just fine, Monsieur,” she answered, aware that she must preserve the formalities. *I want to go to my room*, a voice in her bawled. In the first adult act of her life, she stifled the voice and, focusing on her breathing, summoned her life force, cleared her head to think, her body to respond. *No excuses—results*, she reminded herself. Perhaps she had no stomach for this sort of thing.

He asked, and so—to pass the time—she told him about her fiancé, Kilian, and then about her apprenticeship in the silk, her heart still pumping blood behind her ears, her eyes, her breastbone.

He said that his mother lived in the Camargue, at the mouth of the Rhone. He wanted to live closer to her, as she was aging, so he had taken a position with Roubigant.

She told him about her trip to the Camargue six years earlier, how she had visited Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer with her parents and older sister on a pilgrimage. He listened carefully.

“Did you visit Tour de Constance also?” he asked blandly, seeking to establish the fact that her family was Huguenot, among those artisans of the Protestant sect who had taken the secrets of their guilds with them, more than a century earlier.

Tour de Constance, she thought, evoking the tower overlooking the Mediterranean. Huguenot women who did not escape when the

borders were closed were kept prisoners there, locked up until they died. Narrow slits in the walls allowed them to gaze out over the sea, hoping for a glimpse of husbands and sons sentenced to row as galley slaves until muscles and health were torn beyond repair. Bare fingers clasping a piece of stone had carved the word “*resistez*” over and over in the walls. *Now Bouffier knows who I am*, she thought, *who we are, les Duladiers*. All Europe knew how the Tour de Constance figured prominently in the personal history of every Huguenot family.

Then presenting it as part of her brief, Bouffier gave Catherine a tour of his inventory, ingredients that amounted to a trip around the globe, essences new to her. Ylang-ylang, attars of rose from Bulgaria, from Persia. Civet from China. His ingredients were stored by type, and then alphabetically, she guessed, in valuable glassware and tight tin boxes. Le Fournier’s disks, he told her, were dilutions of essences drawn from Bouffier’s stock.

“And these are my fixatives,” he said. “Ambergris, sandalwood, orris root, musks of various types, uretic salts.”

“Extracts from animals with strong scent glands?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he replied. “Like your female silkmoth. Also,” he continued, “quite literally, salts crystallized from urine itself.”

“Which creatures?”

“Civet from the cat-fox. Ambergris, not exactly the same but similar: the sperm whale. Uretic salts from our human sisters as well,” he said with his provocative grin.

When she flinched, he added, “Just as in dyes,” and lifted his eyebrows, wrinkling his forehead. “Urine drawn from the gravid human female is an exceptional fixative for certain classes of fragrance and dye. But don’t tell me you don’t know that, Mademoiselle Duladier, as versed as you are in textiles.”

So that’s it, she thought. *Le Fournier is also searching for a particular fixative. I wonder where he gets his gravid females*, she thought, her wit (if not good humor) returning, along with color to her face.

The window between the rooms flew up and the unmistakable

hand of M. Le Fournier (pale with hair on the knuckles) passed a formula through to M. Bouffier without a word.

Purple ink etched on vellum, screaming storks flying north, she thought on seeing the characters.

Bouffier took the vellum and closed the window. He began to scan the equation with a frown, fingering the folds of his expansive, good-humored forehead. “Hmm,” he said.

The window raised a moment later and the disk of silk—*my disk*, Catherine thought—was almost flung in, careening a couple of meters before Bouffier stopped it from rolling off his workbench.

This can't be happening, she thought. *I'm flanked and locked in*. She appealed in Dialog one more time. *What are my choices?* she asked.

At last, a response came through, a clear channel: *Stay and fight*.

She made a swift appeal to the Madonna, a prayer for mercy: *How can I? Wasn't Cousin Wilhelm right? I am fragile, untried*.

It surged through her, the immediate response a *maitresse de la soie* in good standing could expect from her Earthly Queen. *You have the strength and stature to stay. To fight. I am here, backing you up*. She could feel herself growing out of her hips, her spine lengthening, breath her tool again.

“What have you done to him?” Bouffier asked, looking up from the formula, eyes wide, face innocent of any expression. “He’s usually so . . .”

This was the first time she saw M. Bouffier’s mimicry, for without a moment’s transition, he thundered his brow, and—beetling his eyebrows, pulling his lip, flexing his fingers against each other—intoned, “The assignment is a simple one and should be able to be concluded in a fortnight.”

She was amazed at his caricature of Le Fournier, eerie and accurate, not to mention the certain knowledge that he had been eavesdropping on them earlier. *They are not friends*. As the knowledge rippled through her, a snort of laughter erupted. She had to cover her mouth to avoid spraying the desk with spittle.

Bouffier gravely wiped his desk with his handkerchief. "We're very careful about contaminants here," he said straightfaced as he dropped the offending square into a basket beneath his desk.

She dug her own handkerchief from her pocket. "I can see this is going to be standard equipment for our work together." She threw down the gauntlet, a clear challenge, trimmed in lace. *You will see what I am made of.*

"I was given to understand that I am not a contaminant but a fixative." She studied him. *Have I gone too far?*

He was laughing, but soundlessly, with a little wheeze, his wickedly merry eyes fastened on hers. "That seals it," he said. "We're born co-conspirators. Now let's see what the Nose is up to." He turned and picked up the disk.

She half rose in her chair.

He sniffed deeply, flushed an alarming dark bloom, and then slumped over his desk. "Oh!" he moaned. "The Nose has gone off into the abyss."

She moved swiftly and noiselessly to the door. She could not tolerate this . . . this—repeated insult. She would batter her way out of the *parfumerie* if need be. Darkness would cover her escape. She seized the handle and twisted it, glancing behind her as she opened the door.

"And you would like to disappear," he said, cocking his eyebrow at her.

She hesitated.

Placing the disk to the far corner of his desk, he asked rhetorically, "Can you disappear?" fanning her fears. Then, "You must be terribly affronted. Are you going to go home?"

With her toe, she moved a jar over to prop the door open. "Your labo needs an airing out, Monsieur," she said, acidly.

Again he laughed, his hand over his mouth so Le Fournier would not hear, eyes bulging with suppressed mirth.

"No," she said, surprising herself. "After all, I think I'm going to stay." *Could she be saying these words? "And fight." Thank you, Madonna.*

"Good girl!" he said admiringly, and then, looking around, added mildly: "Are we having a war?"

"Don't toy with me, Monsieur." It came out sounding good.

"You have no argument with me?"

"Do I?"

He raised both hands, palms out, as if warding her off. "I'm just a paid lackey, like you." He studied her. Then, "Will we work together?"

She returned to the chair. "I am not an inventory to plunder, Monsieur. Let me make that clear. As I already made it clear to your boss. I have no secrets other than the ones any maiden holds dear."

He regarded her for a long moment. "What about your assignment?"

"What do you think that assignment is?" she asked politely, folding her hands, as if she were asking, "Sugar or cream?"

He gestured to her.

"I have been asked to help identify the smell of the mating silkmoth. But in less than an hour in the Roubigant labs, I have had my privacy—my very person!—violated. Why, Monsieur?"

Bouffier quickly sketched out Le Fournier's research—which had apparently been going on before he was hired as *chimiste*—and then concluded, "If there's the slightest shred of evidence that his hypothesis is true, it would make a great difference to the science of fragrance. Just imagine: if we could study you, your natural smells, and through you approach the ineluctable fragrance of the female, playing out her irresistible bait to the male moth, why . . . we might discover a whole new ethereal range of smells, attractants, that we have never breached before . . ."

She interrupted him. "Bait! For whom?" she threw out. "How could the two of you imagine that the human male might respond to the

scent of the female moth? More ridiculous still, where did you ever get the idea that the female moth and the silk *maîtresse* share anything physical . . . a smell?" She heaped scorn on Le Fournier's hypothesis, as instructed. She had become what she prayed to be, a fox, a vixen ripe with her natural scent, hoping to obfuscate the trail for hounds, to lead them on a merry chase and then disappear. She didn't have to remember her parents' instruction; she inhabited the strategy. *Ridicule the man to his associates*. Bouffier might mimic the eccentricities of Le Fournier-the-man, but he was clearly exalted by their work together as fragrance scientists.

She had to admit it. *Their work could open up new horizons for science. But let them use bees! The invisible bond I share with La Phalène will not be breached. What would the cost be if their guild were exposed, if this, one of their deepest secrets, were revealed? Maîtresses could be compromised. Captured like specimens, exploited. A horrifying series of images unrolled. No, this must be stopped. Closer to hand, my own safety is at stake.*

Distract him. Lead him on. Feed him scraps. The strategy was hers now to command. Bouffier would help her concoct those scraps. *Then at the end of the fortnight, leave with the cheque.* Her future depended on this.

She came quickly to her own conclusion. *Secure Bouffier first. Tantalize him. Keep the boundaries clear and enforced.* She could feel the danger in this strategy, how easily she could become trapped in the sticky web of her connivances.

She had learned the power of the truth long since.

"If you want to help me," she said, "know this: If we are to work together on this, you must trust me. And I must trust you. You must never cross the line to physical intimacy. I need your pledge on this. Or you will find me gone by tomorrow. Not 'run away.' No—refusing to work with you. Both of you. Exposing you."

"We can find someone else, another *maîtresse*," he said.

"Not this spring, you can't," she returned. "We hear that Roubigant board members are impatient for a product."

His eyes widened.

I have to play the cards I've been dealt, she thought.

"I'd like to help you, Catherine. I'd like to be on your side—may I call you Catherine?" Bouffier scrutinized her face. "But do you and your guild really find Le Fournier's quest ridiculous?"

She rolled her eyes. "He goes too far with it, Monsieur. He has conflated the body of a *maîtresse* with that of the female moth. Of course we are intimately familiar with the worm and the moth and all of their changes. But that's the limit of it. Where do you think this notion of his came from?" An idea was occurring to her, a red herring to wave in front of this *chimiste*, to cast doubt into his mind.

"But already he finds something in you that he believes is leading him closer. I know him. His antennae are quivering." He gestured toward the disk.

The shock of Bouffier's metaphor threatened to undo her at this turning point. *Does Le Fournier remind everyone of a moth then?*

She shrugged, carefully nonchalant. "Does he have a wife?"

Bouffier seemed to take a long time to digest what she was saying. She would not spell it out for him.

"Do you mean, is he searching for the fragrance of a vir—. . . of a maiden . . . and telling himself . . ."

"That he is searching for the fragrance of a moth? Yes."

He seemed to come to a decision. Perhaps he had been thinking the same thing? "All right. This is trying my patience. I too am offended by Le Fournier's measures, this Quixotic quest of his! His invasion of your person. Le Fournier has gone too far. Everyone is laughing at him, not just your guild but ours as well. And you have heard rumors . . . that members of our board . . .?"

She nodded. "Are losing patience with Le Fournier."

"How . . .?" He was close to spluttering.

"My father has his spies."

"Can you imagine how it humiliates me? To be branded as his *chimiste*? After I leave here, if we fail, I will never find work in the industry again."

She dared put her hand on his arm. "Calm yourself," she counseled and put her finger to her lips, gesturing toward the window they shared with the Nose.

"Ach!" He threw her arm off, hid his face in his arm. "I am ruined."

"Not yet," she said, watching as he unfurled from his posture of despair, grasping onto her words. "I may see a way. Can you listen a moment?"

Something seemed to resolve in him. He moved his chair a fraction closer to her and leaned forward. "Whatever you can give us. Just a hint. He will be happy with it. He is obsessed, stuck on one note. I know him. Work with me. We will give him something . . . something that he doesn't know he is looking for. Save his face; give Roubigant their new perfume. La Vierge de Printemps."

The Virgin of the Spring.

He gestured into the air. "Something young and *fraiche*. All those jaded types who fell out with Napoleon and Josephine . . . it will take them by storm."

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Your banker will be happy. And I will help you bring Le Fournier down. Isn't that what you want? To make him deranged, to shake him out of his comfortable complacency?"

Seeing the answer in her eyes, he relaxed back in his chair. "Yes. You want your revenge. I do see it now. Brilliant. Mademoiselle, I take my hat off to you." He leaned forward. "He thinks he wants the scent of the moth; he pursues it monomaniacally. We throw the scent of a maiden before him, which he cannot admit he seeks. We will derange this famous Nose. Hubris will bring him down." He crossed his heart

like a boy. "I detach myself from him." With the force of his forearms, he repeated the X in the air as if exorcizing his past.

Ah, he is younger than I first imagined, she thought. *Roubigant his first position. Early twenties,* she calculated.

He laughed aloud, full of exuberance for their plan. "He will marry before summer. I predict it." He sobered. "You are intimately familiar, you said, with all of the phases of raising silk, from worm, through metamorphosis, through the mating of the moth. There are similarities between those smells—smells perhaps only those of you in your guild can detect—and other smells in nature, in us, the human?" He threw out his hands, gave the classic Gallic shrug. "Surely you must appreciate that—as a *chimiste*—I am fascinated with this invisible world we have yet to penetrate. As is Le Fournier."

Could she tell him how moved those in the silk guild are to witness the moments when the male begins to approach the female, how the air of the room thickens with something that has been described as a blend of human and insect *punque*? She had been a girl when she first heard Napoleon's instructions to his Empress: "I will be on the road for three weeks," he had famously requested. "Don't bathe before I return." Her people, *les Cévenoles*—Huguenots, they call us—were a salty people. Other people analyzed the world; her people tasted and smelled their way through it.

Catherine measured the risk; Bouffier was handing her an opening. Hadn't the worst thing already happened? I need an ally here. If I reveal my hand, then he will reveal his. And so the seduction of him, and thus of Le Fournier, can be accomplished.

Can I trust him? she asked herself. *No. But I can use him.* She would use the truth as bait. She would play it out, one piece at a time.

"Let me tell you this," she said. "It is well known, Monsieur, that there are some fragrances you may smell but once in your life that will tantalize you for the rest of your life. I am told that perhaps the smell of a maiden and the smell of the moth are not dissimilar in that way."

She shrugged as if to say, *But how would I know the smell of a maiden?*

“That’s why the day and night of the moth’s mating, usually within the fortnight after May Day, is one of the most sacred events of our *zunft*. It’s the whole effect, the *mélange*: the irresistible smell of the female, the beating and display of the male, then the continuous mating, locked together. Later, when both male and female are exhausted, the male slows his . . .” *Restraint, restraint, Catherine*, she cautioned, girding herself for the battle for her essence that she foresaw on the horizon. “That’s the moment when everyone assembled draws a great draught of air. When a human nose may pick up a whiff of the ‘maddening effluvium,’ as my father calls it,” she said, eyes lowered. “The members of our family, our guild, search the air for one hint while he . . .”

She was suddenly exasperated. It had never occurred to her that she might need to use tact in describing the mating of La Phalène and L’Imago. She gave up. “*Alors*, there is simply no way to describe it to someone who has not smelled it.”

He grimaced, crestfallen.

“Try,” he said. “I am a fragrance scientist,” he pleaded, as if this were a trade secret she owed him.

But I don’t even know you! Something in her resisted giving this to him, scant evidence that even part of their hypothesis was correct, that a trained human, one initiated into Her secrets, could smell the mating call of La Phalène. *How else can I hook him?* Mustering up her reserves, she made an attempt to describe it.

“But perhaps the intensity of the moth’s passion alludes to its magnitude. He is frenzied by her tantalizing aura, Monsieur.” She felt herself begin to blush. Laying her cards on the table, this gesture of trust, was proving to be more difficult than she had imagined. “The male and female stay joined together for an entire night and into the morning . . . before he dies and she begins laying her eggs.”

Bouffier slowly let out his pent-up breath. Like a fish, hooked, then released.

“And you . . .,” he said, a question in his eyes.

Catherine smiled. “Forgive me, Monsieur Bouffier. I’m a country girl; this is second nature to us. Our business! There is no way to hide the sexual background of that moment out of time, when members of the guild can smell the moth.” *And smell the moth in the maitresse*, she allowed, to herself. “But you don’t imagine that the maitresse would smell like a moth, Monsieur?” She laughed. *Obscure the tracks. Ridicule the man behind his back.* “You seem to have more sense than that—but perhaps I’m wrong.”

“Preposterous!” Bouffier exploded, then collapsed again. “He is a buffoon.”

With a heightened air of innocence, she said, “But why should I tell you what it’s like, Monsieur Bouffier? You’ve been in the *magnanerie* when moths mate, haven’t you?”

“Of course!” he said, and laughed so they would both know he was lying.

He has no experience, she said in Dialog.

The first one is homeless where the second one was born, came the swift response.

Yes, *Le Fournier*. She spoke his name in Dialog, plumbing the depths of ancestral knowledge for information about this anomaly. *His antennae are quivering. The signs of the Imago about Le Fournier, his beetling eyebrows, the hunch of his shoulders . . . The mark of the Moth on the son. What does it mean?*

There was no response in Dialog. She must stay focused on the present moment.

“Le Fournier has male and female moths brought to him after they hatch. He dissects them to analyze their scent glands.” Bouffier studied her for a reaction.

Recoiling, she felt as if her person were being attacked. “Vivisection?”

The insult," she hissed. *To the Mother*. This place, this lab, was desecrated; she had sensed it. Now, as if the disk's capturing her most intimate scent were not enough, this new evidence left her torn between "run" and "stay and fight."

He studied her. "Why do you find this such an outrage? It's all in the name of science."

"You don't understand!" She pushed the air away from her with both hands. She would hear these words again, "in the name of science," but this was the first time.

"Help me understand," he asked.

What could she say that would not betray their deepest secrets? *We have a sacred pact with the silk? We are pledged to protect les imagines, our moths? I might just as well undergo vivisection myself?* No honest response was acceptable.

She knew what she must say; she was exhausted, but she had been schooled in strategy: "I have to think this through. Can we talk again in the morning?"

Very calmly, as if dealing with a wild animal, he said, "No. You must tell me now, while you are still consumed by this horror you feel."

He studied her for a moment, then asked, "Will we work together?" He put out both hands, opening them, the universal gesture for *I am weaponless*. "Shall we be allies in this?" He looked at his palms as if they were measuring scales. "I must know now," he explained, "because by tomorrow morning, I will either be working with Le Fournier . . . or with you and your family."

There. It was out. She could be decisive too. She took a deep breath, gauging her strength. *Yes*. She released the breath, measuring, probing. *Yes*. She would see the fortnight through to the end. And she would not be singed; the Madonna would be her shield.

The vague outlines of a plan began to spill out of her, Bouffier adding his essential pieces as they went.

"Madame Le Fournier knows I am here," Catherine began. "She will expect me to call on her after the worms have spun themselves

into their *cocons*, perhaps during *décoconage*, when the silk workers gather to harvest the *cocon*s and speak of their dreams. Or to witness the mating. She is ensuring my safety here, in fact. To my parents, to the guild, to our Rothschild.” She lifted her chin. *I am not alone.*

And yet . . . *They burned heretics here.* She steeled herself for the fight by recalling the history of the Cathars, *les hérétiques du Languedoc*, and more recently, of the persecution of her own people, the same people as the Cathars, so-called Huguenots, as other people styled them.

“We will pursue the fragrance with Le Fournier,” Bouffier said guardedly.

“Yes,” she concluded. “But you will protect me?” she asked, putting her hand on his arm again. She watched while a flush crept from the roots of his hair into his stiff collar while his face betrayed not a thing. *Am I going too far?* she wondered.

Catherine had been eager to spend a fortnight in Grasse with good reason. Privately, she had asked her mother and sister for their opinions, and they had agreed that a short separation would let her fiancé’s passion for her deepen into a fire that would last. Even so, she had no plans to linger in the south beyond the fortnight. At eighteen, she knew herself to be ripe. A brief respite from Kilian’s ardor would help them wait until after the church banns had been published, even after the wedding had been celebrated, before they began to enjoy the mysterious unfoldings behind their bedroom door. She was satisfied to leave those explorations for her husband to map. And yet now she acted in full consciousness of the power she was exerting over this man she had just met, Monsieur Bouffier.

At eighteen, Catherine’s honor was intact apart from a few kisses that Kilian—older by a half dozen years—had pressed on her when her parents’ eyes were averted. Her familiarity with the collection of erotic books their partners in the Orient had sent Auguste Duladier allowed her to feel wickedly well-informed, and her sister Elisabeth, a few years older and married to their cousin Wilhelm, had doled

out savory details of their marriage bed. Honest and deluded as any girl her age, Catherine jiggled between bravado and quivering candor about her untested self. *I can handle myself around these luminaries of the parfum world—can't I?* She thought it through. *Surely they would never force me. They have their own reputations to guard.*

“We can't very well pursue the scent of a vir—. . . of a maiden,” Bouffier said, “if you are not.” His voice became gravelly. “Isn't it in our interest to keep you intact?” He tried to laugh but had to clear his throat. “You can trust me,” he said, “to respect the necessary distance.”

She removed her hand from his arm.

“And Le Fournier? He is only interested in one thing: capturing your scent.” Enthusiasm broke through his reserve. “We will trap him!” he exclaimed, clenching his fist.

“In fact, he will trap himself,” she summarized tartly.

Between them, until early May, they would tease Le Fournier with formulas, fulfilling her parents' instructions. She would be expected to witness metamorphosis in the *maitresse's magnanerie*; it was right here in Grasse, and Catherine was a *maitresse* visiting another's village, in the season. She would be led to see what was next. *I am your tool*, she prayed devoutly to her patron, La Madonne Noire. *Use me.*

For his part, Bouffier quickly sketched out his plan, reassuring Catherine. They would tantalize Le Fournier together, bringing him close to realizing his end, then snatch it away—repeatedly. Within reach, but elusive. That would be their by-word—*élusif*.

In a word, they would derange Le Fournier's senses, baffle his nose with Catherine's scent, which he had already shown himself to be besotted with. They agreed; he deserved it for his effrontery, his blind arrogance.

It took no more than this for Bouffier to persuade her to work with them.

Catherine told herself that, while she didn't trust Bouffier, she had no other choice to accomplish her end of throwing confusion into

Le Fournier's quest. She needed Bouffier's skills with chemistry. She would have to keep flirting with the chemist, keep him bound to her side, off-balance, insist that he honor his pledge to ensure her safety.

And she would prepare herself for the possibility that she would have to flee. She would search the grounds when she was not in the lab working. Find a plant in the landscape to rub on her body that would disguise her own scent from a tracker. Willow worked, she knew. She would identify all possible routes off the grounds and walk them repeatedly with her eyes closed, so she could move with certainty in the dark of the moon, which would be coming up at the end of the fortnight.

She had a little money; she would walk every day, explore, choose an inn well off the stagecoach route where she could run and hide. Perhaps she would find Madame Le Fournier's *magnanerie* and, even though the *maitresse* would be engaged in bringing her worms through to spinning their *cocons*, she might make a short introduction of herself to the older *maitresse*, fulfill the expected formalities, assess her senior colleague's honesty. Catherine wondered, *Would Madame Le Fournier have overheard my distressed calls in Dialog? My inquiry about the meaning of the mark of the Moth on her son?* It was a possibility she couldn't eliminate.

She realized she could not trust the maidservant Gabrielle or Mme. Le Fournier or M. Bouffier; she could trust no one but herself. And the rich repository of Dialog. And La Madonne Noire.

Surely no harm could come to her if she only stayed alert and prayed.



Each day, Le Fournier's formulations crept closer to a complex scent Catherine began to recognize—part maiden, part moth.

Le Fournier was good for his word that Catherine would see a bit of the countryside before she returned home. He had arranged a trip

for them to the walled village of Saint-Paul de Vence, on the eve of May Day, a marvel for Catherine, a girl from the countryside. If there had been no festival at all, she would have missed the celebration of this ancient Celtic quarter holiday.

Directly after, as the fortnight drew to a close, they had been invited to Madame Le Fournier's *magnanerie* to witness metamorphosis. *How opaque am I, how transparent?* Catherine had wondered after that signal event. With the two *maîtresses de la soie* catalyzing the men's response as they witnessed the miracle of metamorphosis and the moth's elaborate mating rituals that followed, even Bouffier recognized the scent they were pursuing.

"*Très éluisé,*" he told her archly. "No wonder you couldn't describe it."

I am too close to this, she realized. *Is this also the scent of a virgin?* For she was no longer technically a virgin. One night, with the moon riding high on the combined fragrance of the sea and the *garrigue*, Catherine had opened her windows and called the Moth to come to her, a ritual each *maîtresse* enacted in her time to bring her virginity to a close. With the help of a piece of fruit from the bowl, she had opened her legs and her inner sanctum to the Moth, their Imago. *No human lover can ever compare,* she told herself as she fell asleep in her tumbled sheets. *And yet, how could something so momentous—calling the Moth, having Him come to me—occur without ripples, out from the center to distant shores?*

Soon she would speak of this in Dialog. All of the women of her family, as far away as they were in distance, would celebrate her opening, would remember their own openings, when they had each called the Moth to come to them. She spent the next morning in her room writing a poem about the event that had transformed her life.

And then it was time to leave Grasse; her assignment was concluded. The *parfumeur* and the *chimiste* had declared her consultation a success. In her own opinion, Bouffier and Le Fournier had settled on a fragrance heartbreakingly close to the scent of their mating female,

La Phalène, but what was done was done. Catherine packed her bags and booked her coach, the scent of Grasse a corruption in her nostrils. Determined to ask her mother to publish the church banns immediately, and to allow her fiancé to bed her before the ceremony, Catherine longed to be home.

She was feeling generous when Bouffier sent a note asking her to tea at the local inn the afternoon before she was scheduled to leave. She agreed to meet him, to throw cold water on their little flirtation, to accept the paltry gift he would doubtless contrive to press on her.

This is a story of vivisection, her mind would begin, ever after, whenever she ran the details of what would follow across the scrim of her mind.



Over tea, Bouffier asked if I would sport with him on our last night. Acting as if it were merely a joke in bad taste, I declined.

He took a vial with a dropper out of his pocket. "I put this in your tea," he said.

"What is it?" I rose up, alarmed.

"Have you heard of Spanish fly?" he asked, his voice growing hollow and distant. His grim smile faded from my view as the first jolt hit me, a blow between my legs. A violent orgasm seized me with its contraction. Then another. I whimpered.

He got me upstairs, half carrying me. We stopped on the stairs while I straddled his thigh, stropping myself against him for relief.

Bouffier's joking ways fell behind us, though his eyes glinted with a strange light. "You must have known it would come to this, Catherine," he said gruffly, as if he were blaming me for what was coming to pass.

A hundred candles flickering. The sound of a high wind, though the windows were closed. A roaring. Le Fournier was there . . . and my maid Gabrielle. A woman screamed, cursed. I realized it was me.

As if this were a ritual they enacted, they didn't speak, to me or to each other, except to grunt commands. "Turn her." Or "Tie her there. Like that." Le Fournier's *schwanz* hung down the inside of his thigh like a horse's. He slapped me from time to time. I cried, of course, subjected to so much violence, so much contempt, his touch nothing like the Moth's gentle ovipositor. The brush of His wings.

Bouffier filled whatever opening Le Fournier was not filling. It was as if the two men were replicating the mating of the moths, keeping themselves from—what?—spending themselves, so as to last through the whole night.

"You opened your windows to us that night. You called us, Catherine," Bouffier said once, when he had his face buried in my neck, thrusting, groaning.

Gabrielle—my maid no longer—kept the wicks of the candles and lamps trimmed. Fed the men, gave them drink when one of them took a moment to rest. Checked my bonds to make sure they weren't loosening or cutting me. Changed them if one of the two men asked for a different position.

If they hadn't tied me, I don't know what I would have done to myself. *Now I know what need is. Yes, I have heard of this. The Moth Demon.* Just as when Bouffier asked me how I had imagined it could end differently, I blamed myself. I had called up the Moth, called Him with all my power as a young maiden. L'Imago heard my call and came to me, as with all our women's sexual initiation. And the men . . . the men heard my call too. How could they have missed it? A powerful, rare alchemy, one I had only heard of, whispered among our women, whispered for fear of summoning it.

The Madonna is orchestrating all of this for my benefit. It helped to say so. I repeated it to myself again and again as night waned, as I thrust my hips up to take their punishment, as I sucked, scratched, screamed. Begged them not to stop.

The maitresse must be wounded, the Old Text says.

The next morning, when the drugs had worn off, Bouffier wrapped me in his cloak and helped me get out of the inn, without being seen, back to my room in the mansion.

My trunk, packed since the day before, stood in the corner. I was so sore and overcome with—what?—a terrible empty feeling, like being dead and not caring.

“You killed my girlhood,” I said as Bouffier brushed his hand across my hair.

Bouffier was kind in his way, now that he was unmasked before me as my rapist. He had a bath brought in, helped me into my clean night clothes, pulled back the fresh sheets on my bed, spooned soup into my mouth, drew my blinds, kissed my forehead, and told me to sleep.

“You took my eggs,” I accused him.

“Yes,” he said, as he closed the door. I heard the key turn in the lock but I didn’t care.

Later, much later, in reverse: I heard the key turn in the lock and he was there, waking me with his slow hands. It was afternoon. He brought me a platter of fruit and fed me tidbits of fig and papaya while I wept and trembled and ranted. Oh, I was completely undone.

Then Bouffier said, “Now you must stop. It’s enough. After all, what has happened? We’ve made you a woman in the most delightful way.”

“In the most violent way,” I accused him. “I can’t even walk I am so sore. You have injured me.”

“No, we have not injured you,” he said, like a father or brother. “We have opened you to one of life’s pleasures. And you have given us the gift of your secrets. A fair exchange.” He had the nerve to bow.

“My fiancé would have given me a more tender opening,” I said tartly. “You will have to answer to him! There has been no pleasure for me in this.”

“Ah, my little spark,” he said fondly. “I have brought the pleasure.” He pulled a long, dark, curved piece of finely wrought padded leather from a velvet bag.

“No!” I said, curling myself into a ball.

I heard him open a jar. “My own special blend,” he told me as he reached under me, thrusting his fingers into my crack and forward, to where I hurt. “With a dash of cayenne to make you swell and burn.”

I unfolded, trying to escape his touch from the front, and delivering myself to him from the rear. He had the nerve to smile. He gently pulled my nightdress over my head, bade me lie on my stomach, and massaged me slowly and deeply from the soles of my feet—each finger, the lobes of my ears, my buttocks, until I wanted him, humiliating myself again with my naked need. He wielded that polished crop with the utmost finesse, using it to tease out of me what I had never dreamed lived there. Now I could see plainly that he was older than I had thought, for no boy in his early twenties would have known as much about a girl’s body as Bouffier did.

After, while he idled beside me on the bed and I wondered that I hadn’t died from both pain and pleasure, he asked me to stay, told me he would make me love him. “You are my creature, Catherine,” he said.

I couldn’t deny it. In twenty-four hours, oh perhaps in most of a fortnight, he had made me his creature. Then he unrolled another act in our play, humiliated me, slapped me, called me names, shameful names, pulled me up on all fours, made me do shameful things. Withheld himself while he brought me near to ecstasy, on the razor’s edge. Made me crawl and grovel.

Afterward, I asked him if Le Fournier had been watching through a peephole. He said no, Le Fournier was busy working. Couldn’t be bothered watching. That he, Bouffier, was working too, taking a long lunch.

He dressed fully. Took a cigar out of his pocket, licked it. Opened his trouser front and put his thing—*did they all look like this up close?*

I wondered—in my mouth. Put the cigar in me, between my legs, moved it in and out. Moved his thing in and out of my mouth. I was choking. Thought he was trying to kill me. *Was this normal?* I had never heard of a man ejaculating in a woman's mouth before, didn't expect it. And he was cruel, grabbed my hair, said he would break my neck if he felt my teeth, forced tears from my eyes by suffocation, his fleshy ruffled thing cutting off my breath.

Then I surprised myself, arched, wanting life, electric, full of breath as he released me. I spit it out, choking. He slapped me, hard. "Swallow it, Catherine," he said. I swallowed. It tasted like something a maid would use to shine a tub, clean and slimy like an oyster. Then he straightened his tie, tucked himself back in his trousers, and drawing a pouch out of a drawer in my sidetable, poured gold coins on my body. "I have more," he told me. "I can take care of you. Your fiancé won't want you. You'll see. 'Used goods,' he'll say. I can make you a queen, a queen of the Cote d'Azur. Lady of the Night," he purred.

I threw my slipper at him. Stomped to the window, opened it, and threw his fly-spattered platter of vile fruits out onto the lawn. I contemplated the drop to the ground floor. Surely with a sheet tied to the bedpost . . .

I needed him gone. "Get out!" I shrieked.

He grinned.

"Get out," I repeated through gritted teeth.

"Make me," he taunted.

I prayed, prayed aloud to the Madonna so he could hear me speak to Her. Desperate, I was breaking all the rules. I didn't even think: *They might burn me for my devotion to Her.* I didn't even know which religion claimed each of these blackguards. I had seen a blue medal around Bouffier's neck in Mme. Le Fournier's *magnanerie*.

On my knees, I told Her that I knew that this sexual awakening was Her gift to me. I thanked Her for it. But I also prayed with everything I had, told Her I wanted to go home, back to my life. And She filled me.

I rose up off the floor armed, grabbed the sheets off my bed, flinging the gold to the floor, told him I would call the authorities, ordered him from my room. I would never be so degraded as to stay with him, I told him. Never.

“Adorable,” he said. “Little vixen.” He grabbed my wrist and twisted it so I came to my knees. “Who would believe you?” he growled. “You willingly came to the inn yesterday for tea, propositioned me. You’re a trollop, Catherine, a natural trollop. Be ready: your fiancé won’t want you. Stay with me. I’ll give you the world. I’ll give you a little time. Ask yourself: do you have a choice?”

When I pointed to the door, my mouth set, he picked up the cigar, saying, “For Le Fournier. He’s still in pursuit of his quest. Not quite there yet. A perfectionist. Continuing his experiment.” When he turned to leave, I kicked at him and missed. He laughed again. I closed the door on him, locking it from the inside. “Never,” I said through the door in a firm, even voice.

I dressed for my trip, apprehensive that they would not permit me to leave, ready to make an escape. They had a maid bring up food; I didn’t dare eat or drink anything in case it was drugged. Before the kitchen maid left with the untouched tray, I ordered her to find someone to take my trunk down to the stage. I walked out the door behind her. No one stopped me. They had gotten what they wanted from me. Bouffier had heard my prayer; perhaps it had moved him. I had to believe that was why he was releasing me.

When I was in the coach ready to leave, Le Fournier showed himself, rubbed his crotch, brought his fingers to his nose, grimaced, turned to walk away. I jumped from the coach, ran at him, and tore at his shoulder. He turned. I hissed at him, “You pervert!” and spat on him.

He waved a bank cheque at me for twice the amount we had agreed on. “We have a word for girls like you, Mademoiselle,” he said. “Prick-tease.” He repeated it in French and then in German, watching my face blaze, my eyes bulge with unspoken words. He folded the draft

slowly and then tucked it into the modest décolletage of my travelling suit. "Tell your father you served us very well."

I would not gratify him by screaming at him in the street like a fishwife. "You are pathetic," I told his retreating back. "This is the only way you can get it, isn't it, mama's boy? Stealing what isn't yours."

He turned. "You more than fulfilled the terms of our contract. We got the perfume; you got what you were asking for."