THE ALCHEMY OF FLOWERS

a novel

LAURA RESAU

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HARPER MUSE

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The Alchemy of Flowers

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To my mom . . . and all the nurturers cultivating your own kind of motherhood.

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HERE LIE THE BONES
OF THOSE WHO BROKE THE RULES

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1

The Gardens of Paradise

Dizzy with jet lag, I stood on the wooden platform in Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs as the train vanished into the distance. Cicadas hummed in a mesmerizing rhythm. The scent of lavender curled around me and a surreal blue stretched above the hills. The air itself somehow shimmered.

As I made my way to the front of the station, people whirled past, going about their lives, rolling suitcases, holding hands, kissing cheeks, strolling to tiny cars.

Watching them drive away, I waited alone with my single bag—I'd packed light for my job in the walled Gardens of Paradise. No one to impress but the flowers. Back in Denver, packing had felt therapeutic, choosing what to bring into my new life. Mostly practical khaki-colored things.

Colorado seemed a lifetime away. Tying up the threads of my past had required a tangle of online and phone logistics. As I'd moved through automated voice options, I'd marveled at how *archaic* the process of getting the job had been—a magazine ad, a snail-mailed resumé, a handwritten offer of employment, and paper plane tickets. An impossible task from a fairy tale . . . yet here I was.

In my dazed state, I took in the absurd beauty of Provence on the brink of summer. Perched on a ridge stood a cluster of creamy

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stone buildings topped with red tile roofs. Walled terraces and haphazard stairs wove through the village, which was dotted with cypress and olive trees. Green velvet unfurled over slopes and valleys, rows of lavender ribboned into the horizon, rock outcroppings pierced the sky—all of it begging to be Postimpressionistically painted.

The afternoon sun shone on my fuzzy-brained head as I scanned for someone resembling a personal assistant. At least she'd know what I looked like, thanks to my passport photo.

Oleander blooms whispered in the breeze, and French conversations drifted by, snippets of pleasantries and greetings. Then I registered soft crying, the whimpers of a child.

I locked eyes with a towheaded toddler, slumped against the stone wall, his face pink and tearstained. Lost in the bustle. I hurried to him and knelt down to eye level. Somehow the French word for *lost* came to my hazy brain. *"Perdu?"*

He gave a miserable nod, his face damp with snot and tears. Resisting the urge to comfort him, I stood up and glanced around, noting a woman just looking up from her phone, scouring the crowd, expression frazzled.

When I pointed her out, the child rushed toward her, calling out, *"Maman!"* in his hoarse little voice.

I looked away and swallowed the lump in my throat. This would be the last child I'd see for a while. A fact that made me want to cry, even as I welcomed it.

As the parking lot emptied, I clutched my job offer in my sweaty hand like a talisman, something to reassure me this was real. It had arrived last week, a month after I'd mailed in my application—an assortment of documents, a copy of my passport, two photos, a cassette tape, and a plastic baggy of ashes . . . per the instructions of the job ad. I'd knelt in my garden, opened the airmail envelope with a whispered prayer, then read the hand-

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scripted letter to my rosebuds:

> *One is delighted to inform you that one is offering you employment as a gardener in Paradise. Enclosed, please find an airplane ticket from Denver to Paris, and train tickets to Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs. One will meet you at the station.*
>
> *Respectfully,*
> *Antoinette Beaulieu*
> *Personal Assistant*
> *Le Château du Paradis*

I stuffed the letter back into my pocket, my stomach tightening. Now I was the sole person left at the train station. I had no phone or even a number to call. What if this Antoinette Beaulieu didn't show?

There was no going back to Colorado. No job, no home, no friends or family there. I'd switched all my bills to autopay and hadn't left a forwarding address. I'd donated my cheap belongings and sold my decade-old Subaru, which put a slight dent in my debt. I'd called my parents in Vermont to tell them I'd be off grid.

Then—*poof*—I'd flown out of my life.

And now there was no life to return to.

Just when cold fingers of panic were setting in, a rumble broke through the cicada hum. I squinted up the road. The engine noise grew louder, and a burgundy Peugeot convertible rounded the bend.

It glided into the lot, parking smack in the center. A woman stepped out, somewhere in her sixties, dressed in tasteful, summery shades of silk—a skirt, blouse, scarf, and stockings over slim legs. Her hair, too, was pale and smooth, coiffed in a twist, somehow intact despite the breeze. Sunglasses covered half her face à

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la Brigitte Bardot or some other mid-century French film star.

I felt like a country bumpkin, my hair scraggly and mousy. I'd worn the same gray leggings and tan tunic for twenty hours, slept and sweated in them. I'd assumed someone in soil-stained cargo pants with dirt under her nails would be picking me up—wasn't this place off grid? *Mon Dieu*, had I even packed a hairbrush?

The woman extended a manicured hand. "Mademoiselle Bourne?"

I shook her hand. How odd that she considered me a mademoiselle—I was well into my thirties—but of course, she knew I was partnerless and childless.

My brain felt so slowed down that I couldn't conjure up the words I'd rehearsed in French. I met her hand and squeaked out, *"Oui. Je suis Eloise."*

"*Bonjour.* I am Antoinette Beaulieu. Welcome to Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs." She spoke in the most refined French.

I urged my brain to launch into my *thank-you* speech. *"Merci"* was as far as I got. To make up for my rusty French, I forced a big smile.

"One must be exhausted after so much travel." She opened the tiny trunk of her car.

"Oui." I heaved my bag inside, hoping it wouldn't dirty the interior.

Antoinette slid into the driver's seat as I climbed in beside her, pressing my arms close to my torso to prevent BO from saturating the Peugeot. Thankfully, the top was open.

As we sped past vineyards and olive groves, I tried to ask about the length of the drive, but all that came out was: *"C'est très joli."* It's very pretty.

Antoinette gave a curt nod. "*Alors,* any questions?"

I shook my head. Thank God I could at least *comprehend* French in this brain-addled state. It helped that she spoke formally, not

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unlike *Mon Jardin*, the magazine with the ad that had brought me here. I'd splurged on a subscription so that I could hang onto the French from my junior year abroad fifteen years earlier.

I braced myself for French from here on out.

"*Alors,* you are aware there is no cell service or internet?"

"Oui." At home, this idea had seemed delicious. No social media, no baby posts I'd have to "like." Still, an online French dictionary might have come in handy.

"And no electricity or plumbing?" Antoinette continued, maybe giving me one last chance to change my mind.

"Oui."

"*Alors*, La Patronne has a few simple rules."

La Patronne could mean the lady boss or the owner—in this case, I assumed she was both. "Okay."

"The first is never to break a rule."

"Oui." Curious, I waited for the rest.

"*Bien sûr*, one is aware that children are not allowed."

"Oui!" My reason for coming.

And she was on to the next rule. "One must not *raconter des potins*. For example, if one chooses to go to town, one must not *raconter des potins* about what goes on in Paradise."

I struggled to remember what this meant. To gossip? Was this a verbal NDA? I nodded along—I'd never been the gossipy type.

"Bien sûr," she continued, "one will have everything one needs. There is no reason to leave." She adjusted her sunglasses over her delicate nose. "The final rule is that you stay in your quarters during the hour of *la crépuscule*."

"Crépuscule?" My brain cells scrambled to remember the meaning. Wasn't it a cognate? Alas, the neural pathways were dead ends.

"Doosk," she said in English with a thick accent. "Ze blue hour." So she did know some English, just avoided it at all costs.

I considered this bizarre rule. Well, it wouldn't hurt to stay

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inside—I was usually at home by dusk anyway, eating alone with the TV. Still, I couldn't help asking, "Why, Mademoiselle?"

She paused, stroking her chin.

Merde. She was probably a *madame* despite the lack of a wedding ring.

Finally, she said, "Because that is the rule of La Patronne."

"Oh, okay, *d'accord*." I tried conjuring up a vision of La Patronne. Nothing. Why hadn't I searched for her when I'd had internet access?

I moved my gaze back to the landscape. We were zipping through the valley, passing flowered meadows and shadowy groves, no signs of houses. In the sideview mirror, the hilltop town of Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs had vanished behind us. "How much longer?" I asked, wishing I'd peed back at the station—and then, realizing that sounded rude, added, *"s'il vous plaît?"*

"The Gardens of Paradise are quite remote, Mademoiselle. We are already on the property. There are many hectares that serve as a buffer zone to keep out society. In a few kilometers we will arrive at the heart of it. *Et voilà*."

She pointed her chin ahead, and sure enough, a rooftop came into view. Well, *turrets*, to be precise.

My jaw actually *dropped*. A limestone castle rose from the hill. Beyond its inner walls, an outer ring of fortified walls enclosed the grounds farther down the valley. Only treetops were visible within.

I blinked at the view—something from a Maxfield Parrish painting, complete with golden haze crowning the palace. "Wow."

"Oui. C'est magnifique, Mademoiselle." Magnificent indeed.

The corner of her lip turned up. "The château was built in late medieval times, added to and renovated over the past millennium. Before that were Roman structures, a couple thousand years ago. Before that, a Celtic village. And before that, Ligurian tribes.

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That was around, oh, three thousand years ago."

Would I be living in a *castle*? On top of ancient ruins? Is that what the job ad meant by *unique et rustique* lodging? My boggled mind could only muster up another "wow."

As we grew closer, I could distinguish the château's patchwork of history, even with only its top half visible over the walls. The heavier elements from the Middle Ages—slit windows in thick walls, crouching gargoyles, crenulated turrets—contrasted with the large, elegant windows and red-tiled roofing of the Renaissance sections.

Antoinette continued in her museum guide voice. "Of course, the castle suffered from looting and damage during the Revolution. For added protection, stones from the ruins were used to build the outside wall two centuries ago. Truly, it is all a masterpiece."

Why on earth would anyone leave this place? How could there be a job opening here, ever? I scrounged together the question: "What happened with the last gardener, Madame?"

Antoinette pursed her lips together in distaste.

Oh, *merde*, so *madame* wasn't right, either? Maybe I should have stuck with Antoinette.

After a stretched-out moment, she said, "The former gardener did not follow the rules of La Patronne."

Looking straight ahead, Antoinette added, "She is no longer here."

When I'd come across the job ad in my French gardening magazine last month, it was as if the universe, in all its mystery, had dropped a ball of yarn into my lap. And over the course of that day and the days to follow, metaphysical knitting needles had prodded

me to follow my particular strand across the ocean to the South of France. Maybe that was why I could overlook the strange rules that came with Les Jardins du Paradis . . . and the disturbing tone in Antoinette's voice when she spoke of the previous gardener.

The road turned to dirt, patterned with dappled light from ancient plane trees, and soon the Peugeot pulled up to the gates of Paradise. Limestone walls towered over us, twenty feet high. The tree canopy poked above, and to our right, the château's turrets rose toward a few pearly clouds. Outside the walls, swaths of green held the afternoon light—the buffer zone.

I climbed out of the car and lifted my gaze up the walls, which joined to form an archway over spiked iron gates, hand-forged and well-worn. Just inside the entrance was a fountain encircled by three stone women in robes, holding spools of thread and scissors. Water bubbled up at the center.

I tried to recall my world mythology class from college. Some kind of triple goddess? The Fates?

Beside me, Antoinette pulled a key ring from her purse. She picked out a handcrafted skeleton key, six inches long, the silver smooth and dark, swirled into an intricate flower design. It looked more like an ancient artifact than something functional in the twenty-first century. Yet it worked. She swung open the heavy gates, then opened the car trunk. "Epona goes no farther."

"Epona?"

She nodded at her mint-condition car—1960s was my guess.

"Of course," I said, confused. I'd thought the make was a Peugeot. Maybe Epona was the model? Wasn't Epona the horse's name in my ex's favorite video game? That horse had been paused mid-gallop the night I realized our marriage couldn't be salvaged.

I had the urge to lighten things up with a joke, but Antoinette didn't seem the gamer type. Maybe I could comment about the key instead, like, "Guess we can't just pop by the hardware store for a

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copy!" But there was no way I could pull it off in French, not with my current state of mind.

Instead, I heaved out my bag and asked, "Will I get a copy?"

She slammed the trunk shut. "There is but one key. And I carry it."

After breezing through the gate, she turned and beckoned to me.

I paused, holding my bag, scanning the landscape around us, empty of people or even any *sign* of people.

I asked my jet-lagged mind if this lack-of-key situation was acceptable. No clear answer. "Then how will I leave?"

"As I said, one will not want to leave Paradise."

Glancing at the Fates, I rubbed my forehead. *Think, think, think.* "But if I do? I mean, to go to town. To go to a library, a store, a bank. Not to gossip."

She regarded me with disapproval. "If you wish to leave, simply ring," she said, gesturing to an enormous brass bell hanging just inside the gates.

I furrowed my brow at the strangeness of it all.

"But there is no need to go to town, Mademoiselle. Hundreds of books are available here. Food and necessities are provided." Businesslike, she pulled a pen and folder from her bag. "Fill out this form, please. The accountant of La Patronne will deposit one's payments electronically."

I gave a nervous laugh. "High-tech."

Lips pressed together, she waited. I noticed the amount of my paycheck in euros and mentally converted it to dollars. I redid the math. Twice. This salary was more than I'd made as a play specialist in Denver. Since my living expenses would be covered, my paycheck would automatically go toward reducing my debts.

With sweaty hands, I dug through my purse and found the number of the French bank account I'd opened online, then bal-

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anced the paper on my knee to fill it out.

She handed me more forms—work permit documents, tax info, and a job contract—which I signed by the X's without reading. It would have taken hours to go through legalese in French.

Once I handed back the forms, crumpled and smeared, she said, "Come inside."

Still, I wavered by the gate, my duffel bag beside me.

Antoinette removed her sunglasses and locked her eyes onto mine. Hers were the color of mist. "Mademoiselle, this is a place of power. Power to heal or harm. Two sides of the same *médaille*. If one does not lock the gates, Paradise will be overrun. For the protection of all, the gates remain closed."

My feet stayed rooted. I tilted back my head at the turrets. The tallest one—thick and toothed—had crumbled, as if gargoyles had come to life and flown through. I shook myself, reining in my imagination. Still, the château morphed between a fairy-tale castle and Gothic lair, like that famous optical illusion of maiden and crone in one.

How to interpret my sweating and trembling and dizziness? Excitement or terror? I picked up my duffel, unsure which direction to take: forge ahead into the unknown or return to my burned-down old life.

As if pushed to the edge of her patience, Antoinette demanded, "Mademoiselle, do you want this or not?"

I took a few tentative steps closer to the entrance, catching the scent of rosemary and thyme on the breeze. I ventured farther, until I could peer inside, to secret pathways winding through rose-covered trellises and wisteria arches.

The blossoms murmured, beckoning me inside. *A place of power. Healing.*

Fountains gurgled, a brook babbled, a lark sang, cicadas chirped. Above it all, the château towered and the soft light shone, and

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somewhere inside the gardens, composting *toilettes* called to me.

"Oui," I said, "I want this." And I walked toward the Fates, through the gates of Paradise.

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2

The Impossible Marvel

Clank.

Antoinette locked the gates behind us and stuck the key ring into her handbag.

A rush of something swept over me: delight, awe, fear, elation. I was inside the Gardens of Paradise, and mon Dieu, they lived up to their name! Green blanketed the landscape, layered and textured, so many leaves playing with the light—oak and maple and ash. The air smelled like nectar from a thousand honeysuckle blooms. And the background of birdsong and running water was a massage for the soul.

A cobbled path to the right led uphill, toward an arched iron gate in the interior wall around the château. To my left, a dirt path sloped down toward rushing water sounds and disappeared into fragrant jasmine.

Antoinette swept her arm gracefully to the left. "*Alors*, Mademoiselle, you need only follow the stream to your *unique et rustique* lodging. Make yourself at home. Mina will come by with further instructions."

"Mina?" I echoed, hoping for more details.

Antoinette offered a formal smile, then walked toward the inner gate.

"Um, Madame?" I called after her. "Mademoiselle? Antoi-

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nette?"

She tossed an impatient look over her shoulder. *"Oui?"*

"How will I know which is my *unique et rustique* lodging?"

She waved away my question, unlocking the inner gate. "It will be obvious. Mina and the others are quite competent."

The others? Did this mean I'd have help with the flowers? I hoped so. There were *lots* of them.

She clanked the gate shut behind her, locked it, and vanished into the inner courtyard.

With a deep breath, I started down the dirt path. The earth softened beneath my footsteps and all around, bees darted among purple asters and flax and harebells. I walked along the river, brushing petals with my fingertips. *Hello, beauties!*

"I can't wait to get to know you!" I whispered. I'd spoken with flowers my whole life, but never so many, all at once. Here, I was in the motherlode. "How will I handle you all?"

The flowers reassured me that of course, they'd help out.

Flower voices were subtle—they spoke in songs, sighs, breezes, hums. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be much difference between the flower language here and in my Colorado garden, other than the sheer quantity of greetings and species.

Ten minutes later, I reached the bend in the river at the northeast corner and followed the water's flow to the right. Here, the river tumbled off a cliff twice my height, churning into a natural pool of white foam. The cascade was just a few yards off the path, close enough that I felt its mist. Perched on a nearby boulder was a winged mermaid, carved from stone, gazing at the waterfall as butterflies flitted around her. The beauty made my head spin—or maybe it was the jet lag and thirst and hunger.

I walked past the mermaid and heard a splash. And a squeal. As I turned, I caught a movement in my peripheral vision. My first, unfiltered thought: *That mermaid jumped into the river!*

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But no, the statue remained gazing at the waterfall. I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them. Had the mermaid's mischievous smile been there before?

I tromped onward, now with some caution. After rounding a curve, I came face-to-face with a wooden sign reading BIENVENUE, ELOISE!

And behind it, the most *unique et rustique* lodging I'd ever seen.

A smattering of houses hovered in the trees.

Swinging bridges made of wood and rope connected them. Stained glass windows and French doors opened onto decks, each with potted geraniums and tables and chairs.

A voice came from above, through the leaves—a rich, deep, woman's voice: "You must be Eloise! And I bet you need the *toilettes*!"

I stretched back my head and saw, on the highest balcony, a woman wearing clothes as brilliant as tropical birds—bold prints of orange and yellow and red on a cotton dress and head scarf. Her face was rosy-brown and exuding warmth.

"Oui!" I called back.

"Well, let me show you the way, my friend." She spoke French with an almost singsong accent, easy to understand. She took confident strides along the rope bridges. As she approached, I saw she was a decade or so older than me and large in a comfortable way.

"I'm Mina." She was now halfway down. Her smile was huge, her teeth bright. "I was just getting things ready for you, Eloise."

"Merci, Mina. Enchantée." And I meant *enchantée* not as shorthand for "enchanted to meet you," but rather, in all ways . . . *enchanted*. "So, which house is mine?"

She laughed, deep from the belly. "All of them!"

Something in my chest flew. "But where's yours?"

She continued down the bridges, slow but sure-footed. "Oh, the boys and I, we have our places over there." She gestured through

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the leaves.

"Uniques et rustiques?" I ventured.

"Mais bien sûr!" Nodding, she hooted with more laughter.

She reached the bottom, her face gleaming with sweat. She planted a kiss on each of my cheeks. "Oh, Eloise, how good to have another woman here!"

I allowed her to embrace me, unaccustomed to human touch. I wondered if I should warn her I'd forgotten how to talk to friends—I couldn't move from sunny small talk to broken insides.

As if we were already besties, Mina took my arm and led me through the trees to a wooden shack with a crescent moon burned into the door. Wisteria draped over the structure in a sweet, musky cloud.

"Voilà, Eloise! Your *toilettes!"*

I entered and closed the door, breathing cedar and nectar. Light poured through propped-open stained glass windows. Before me was an olive-wood toilet seat affixed to a bench, polished to a sheen.

I lifted the lid, peered at the pine sawdust and wood shavings in the tin bucket. A composting toilet, as I'd assumed—but far more pleasant than anything I'd imagined. With a content sigh, I peed, then washed my hands outside with lavender soap and water from a copper jug.

"The most magnificent *toilettes* ever," I announced.

Mina threw her head back and laughed, then gave me another hug. "Oh, I can tell we'll have fun together, my friend."

I felt myself give a real smile back.

"Now, Eloise, why don't you unpack and make yourself comfortable. I'll get dinner ready. Hope you like Senegalese food—that's what you get on my nights to cook! Raphaël will be up soon with an *apéro*." Her eyes crinkled. "He's the one who built the most magnificent *toilettes* ever!"

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"*Merci*, Mina."

She gazed at me with undeserved affection, then headed down the river path.

I grabbed my bag, not caring what the hell an *apéro* was, or who Raphaël was—just feeling lighter in all ways. The swinging bridge threw me off-balance, but a jungle-gym kind of off-balance that made me giggle.

My unique, rustic lodging was a *playground*!

With a deep breath, I stepped across the threshold of the first tiny treehouse—a sumptuous room of cushions and candle lanterns and vases of lavender and rose and peony. Floor-to-ceiling shelves of French books, leather-bound and trimmed in gold leaf. A velvet fainting sofa, an antique cast-iron stove, a tiny kitchenette. A cabinet with a glass jug of water, liqueurs of every color—*crème de violette*, *crème de cassis*, *chartreuse*—jars of loose tea, honey, and cookies.

I helped myself to a handful of cookies—buttery shortbread with pansies in the center—so delicious I pretended to faint onto the fainting sofa.

I breathed it all in, and then, like a child with a second wind, I ran, limbs flailing, along the swinging bridges to the next structure—an *atelier*. A wooden drafting table held old-fashioned lab equipment—copper distillation vats, clear tubes, glass flasks and funnels, a vintage Bunsen burner. Shelves displayed mason jars of dried petals and leaves—and strung above were flowers and herbs drying. My gaze landed on a shelf of books: *Les Plantes Médicinales, Savoir des Herbes, Les Essences de Fleur, Les Fleurs Hallucinogènes*. It felt as if someone had left everything just waiting for me.

I raced onward to a small bedroom, airy and bright, all windows and French doors, smelling of sunshine-dried linen. Lacy curtains, soft light, a wood stove, lanterns galore, and vases of peonies.

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Resisting the urge to sink into the bed, I let curiosity pull me one more level up, to a dressing room with robes and towels and an armoire. The centerpiece was an old-fashioned makeup table, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, holding bottles hand-labeled with *eau de rose*, *eau de lavande*, *eau de lilas*.

I sat down at the vanity, breathless, and splashed *eau de rose* on my neck. Something caught my eye beside the mirror—a black leather book, pocket-size and bound by hand. I flipped through it, skimming ink sketches of goddesses and typewritten descriptions. My gaze landed on a drawing of the Fates statue at the garden entrance. I read its caption in a whisper:

> The Fates weave destiny. The Triple Goddess also takes other forms, some more dangerous than others: The Furies, the Morrigan, *Les Dames Blanches*, *Les Matres*, *Les Trois Maries*, and more.

Curious, I flipped back to the first page.

> Welcome to Paradise.
>
> Not everyone may enter My realm. Only those who master an impossible marvel. You-if you stay in My graces-are a fortunate one.

Impossible marvel. *Merveille impossible.* A twist on the mythical *impossible task*? According to the job ad, my principal duty would be turning *merde* into *fleurs*. Shit into flowers. A strange alchemy, a task within the realm of spinning straw into gold. Only ickier.

> I trust you will care for My gardens well.

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Respectfully,
The Goddess of the Gardens

P.S. You should know that strictly speaking, this is not Paradise.

More like a nook of *l'Autre Monde*.

L'Autre Monde. The Celtic Otherworld. A magical land existing in a parallel plane of existence. A place of beauty, joy, abundance, and health, where time moved differently.

I stared at my face in the round mirror with its wavy, silver-backed glass. I thought I'd find the usual exhausted face staring back, but instead, it was a fresh, enraptured face. The face of my hopeful fifteen-year-old self. Or maybe my curious five-year-old self. Or my wild toddler self. Cheeks pink, eyes wide.

I entertained the thought that the mirror was magical, and moved my face closer. The crow's-feet were still there, but softened, along with the furrows over my nose. And my eyes looked practically aquamarine, the usual circles below almost vanished. Green surrounded my head like a halo—reflections of the foliage outside.

And as the leaves rustled and flowers whispered, I heard the giggle of a girl.

Or was it me, giggling inside my head? I felt my mouth part, my throat open, and a ripple of laughter pour out.

I was still laughing when a man's voice called up. "Eloise! The *apéro* has arrived!"

Raphaël.

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3

Refuge for the Broken

I descended the swinging bridges, attempting Mina's grace, without much luck.

From above, I registered this man's hair, thick and nut-brown and pulled into a wavy ponytail that ended below his shoulder blades. His white T-shirt glowed against tanned, muscled arms. There was something solid and compact about him, nothing wasted.

He raised his face to me. Strong jaw, light stubble, smiling eyes, earthy vibe. Objectively, he was good-looking.

I sighed, unsure what to make of this new development.

"Eloise! *Bonsoir!* I am Raphaël."

"Enchantée," I called down.

He was carrying a tray of drinks and snacks. Right. *Apéro*, shorthand for *apéritif*.

Once I reached the second level, I noticed his hands. Ages ago, they might have made my insides flutter. In a previous life, something about certain men's hands would get to me—usually ones who built and fixed things outdoors.

As if from a distance, I wondered if he might be considered *sexy*. It had been a very, very long time since I'd thought of anyone as sexy. I hadn't thought of sex for the sake of sex for a very, very long time. Over a decade, I'd transformed from maiden to crone.

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Anyway, he was too young—late twenties or early thirties? Sure, I was thirty-seven, but an *ancient* thirty-seven. I wondered if he noticed that I'd given up on my body, let the outside deteriorate to match the inside.

In a split second, I took inventory of my state of disrepair. My feet were calloused and my toenails ragged, legs unshaven beneath stretched-out leggings, basically glorified pj's. My long shirt was drab and shapeless—the kind of thing a non-spunky grandmother would wear. And my hair, oh, my hair—ragged and frizzed, long and formless, the dirty-blond of dead leaves, devoid of products beyond shampoo-and-conditioner-in-one. My face wore basic sunscreen—no makeup, no anti-aging serums, no wrinkle creams. Why bother? I was in debt with no one to impress.

Well, this took the pressure off. If I was in cronehood, and Raphaël was in strapping-young-manhood, he'd see me as tacitly off-limits beyond friendship.

I paused on the lower deck and called down, "Monsieur, would you like to come up and have the *apéro*?" My French sounded funny and formal.

His face lit up. *"Oui, avec plaisir!"*

As he walked up the swinging bridge—quite nimbly considering he had no free hands—I smiled to myself. I was inviting a French man *up to my place* for drinks. And he was coming *with pleasure*. Who would've guessed?

Up close, his eyes looked hazel green, foresty and warm in a dappled-light way. He was an inch or two taller than me, which meant we were more or less at eye level. He leaned forward to do the cheek kisses.

I struggled to remember which cheek came first, and picked the wrong one and promptly bumped noses. Eventually, laughing, we managed to touch our cheeks together, then—with relief on my part—sat at the little table.

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The clouds were shifting from gold to orange to pink, the castle towers shining through a gap in the tree canopy. The whole situation was ridiculously gorgeous. The *apéro* turned out to be Kir—white wine with a splash of berry liqueur. Beside the drinks sat a small olive-wood bowl of a nut mix and another of homemade rosemary crackers. Thankfully, I'd stuffed those shortbread cookies into my mouth earlier, or I would've been ravenous now.

"Eloise, welcome to Paradise." He raised his glass in a toast.

I clinked mine against his. "To the Otherworld!"

"Pardon?" He tilted his head.

"Oh, that's what the little goddess booklet said." With amusement, I added, "I love that the Goddess of the Gardens wrote it herself."

I expected a smiling admission of who really wrote it, but he only sipped his Kir, so I joined him, savoring this piece of berry heaven.

In stops and starts, we chatted about my journey. Raphaël spoke French quickly, but when he realized it was over my head, he slowed down and simplified the slang.

"Oh, Eloise, I am just so excited to meet a new friend." Whenever his eyes met mine, they'd flicker away, making me think he was as self-conscious as I was.

Of course, I would let him down, just like I would let Mina down. They thought I was an intact human. Still, I resolved to act like a normal colleague. "So," I asked, "what did you do before you came here?"

A cloud passed over his face. *"Eh bien, alors, euh . . ."*

I waited as he *umm*ed and *uhh*ed in French and looked everywhere but at me.

He finished anticlimactically, "Nothing much."

I felt a desperate need to compensate for his lack of eye contact and fill the empty conversational space. "Well, before this, I was

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doing nothing too. I mean, as far as a job. But there were other things going on, you know, divorce, sadness, anger over my ex's new girlfriend, more sadness, friendships dying, talking only to flowers, setting my old life on fire. Literally."

For a moment, I was back in Denver, engulfed in smoke, dumping flammable liquids into the fire, watching the old Eloise burn as flames rose.

After a beat, he said, "You talk to flowers?"

I gave a tiny shrug, then, desperate to redirect the focus, asked, "What about you? Married? Divorced? Single?"

I pressed a firm hand over my mouth. The Kir had gone straight to my head, removed every inhibition.

He offered a slight nod. It was unclear which marital status he was confirming.

More silence. Just crickets chirping their sunset songs.

Raphaël sipped his Kir and gazed at the trees. "Eloise, all of us here, we have been hurt—and that is why we are in the Gardens of Paradise." His voice was a mix of rough and tender, straightforward and philosophical. "This is a refuge for the broken."

My eyes filled at this unexpected gift. He *understood*. I blinked and sniffled and resisted grabbing an ancient Kleenex from my pocket. Then I sipped my Kir and waited for details about how, exactly, this beautiful man before me was broken.

He offered none. His foresty-sunshiney eyes met mine for a moment, then looked back at the treetops. He seemed skittish at making friends. I could relate.

"Merci," I said. *"Merci, Raphaël."*

A squirrel scampered along a branch, pausing to chirp at us with gusto. Despite myself, I sputtered a laugh, and Raphaël laughed too. Somehow, even rodents seemed more *amusant* in the Gardens of Paradise.

I sipped more Kir. "So, Raphaël, what do you do here?"

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"If something needs to be fixed, I fix it. Or built, I build it. Structures, fountains, irrigation, solar panels." He leaned back, tossed a cashew into his mouth, appearing more comfortable talking about his work. "And I love working with leather, metal, wood—or really, any materials I can find."

That explained my objective appreciation of his hands. And the exquisite *toilettes* he'd made. I remembered my delight learning the French word for "tinkerer" or "handyman" in high school French class. "A *bricoleur*?"

"Exactly." The corner of his lip turned up, revealing a tiny dimple.

I sighed. "I guess I'm in charge of the *fleurs* and *merde*."

"Pardon?"

I flushed. Twenty minutes into a sunset *apéro* in Paradise with a handsome, kind French man and I was bringing up shit. I willed the blood vessels in my cheeks to constrict.

At first, when I'd read the job ad back in Denver, I'd had no idea how to interpret the *merde* to *fleurs* line. *Shit to flowers?* It hadn't been until the middle of that night when the answer had come to me. I'd been dreaming of overflowing toilets and feeling distressed . . . until I flew away, to the Gardens of Paradise and landed beside composting *toilettes*. In my dream, when I'd dumped out the contents, flowers had sprung up—lavender and roses and jasmine, sage and rosemary and thyme. I'd awoken, still smelling nectar, then scrawled out my résumé.

"Compost," I clarified for Raphaël, hoping my solution to the riddle was correct. "That's what I'm in charge of. I think."

"*Oui*, that is true."

I smiled, satisfied, even as my nose wrinkled. This kind of task seemed more palatable in a dream or fairy tale.

"Don't worry." His eyes sparked. "There is a system. It is not stinky."

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"I'm up for it. That's my *merveille impossible*."

I tried not to look too long at that dimple when he smiled, which was often. From the corner of my eye, I glimpsed something in the trees, larger than a squirrel and shaking the lower branches. A yellow blur swung and dropped behind the trunk with a light thud and a giggle. It vanished.

My first thought: a child in this wild playground.

My second: a woodsprite in a magical garden.

My third: an apparition from my jet-lagged mind.

Raphaël said nothing about it, so I shook myself, refocusing on the conversation. "So, who's this big boss?" I asked, squinting at the far-off turrets of La Patronne's castle.

He puffed out his cheeks in the endearing way French people do. "I have been working here for years, and I still do not know. We have never met. She stays sequestered."

Surprising. And mystifying. "But if she doesn't use the gardens, what's the point?"

He took another sip. "At the weekly market, customers pay triple for products grown and made here. Our plants have . . . *talents*."

Talents? A strange word to describe plants. Maybe it was a language thing. Or maybe because this was a *place of power*.

Before I could question him, he continued, "La Patronne desires the bounty from the gardens, yet never enters."

I remembered the rule about staying inside at dusk. "Except for the hour of *crépuscule*?"

"Perhaps. That is one theory."

"You've never been tempted to break the rule, Raphaël?" I raised an eyebrow—a skill I'd forgotten I had. "Spy a little?"

He chuckled. "Life is good here. Why risk ruining it . . . without a reason?"

Standing up, he set down his empty glass, stretched, and looked

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at the sky. "Speaking of *crépuscule*, the sun is setting. Soon it will be time to stay in our quarters. I will give you time to relax."

"Merci, Raphaël."

He picked up the tray. "It is good to have a new friend here, Eloise."

Friend. I gave a breezy smile like a normal person—and I felt, if not exactly normal, then more *intact* than usual.

He walked down the swinging bridges, slowing his pace to accommodate mine. I clutched the ropes—this would take some practice.

"We meet at the dining grove for dinner," he explained when we reached solid ground. "Just follow that path along the river. Nights are chilly, so bring a sweater. We dine at twenty-two hours. *Ça va*?"

I did a quick calculation and came up with ten o'clock. Could that be right? *Ten?* Then again, summer dusk would probably last till about nine-thirty, and we were in France, after all. Back in college, when I'd studied abroad, dinners with my host family sometimes lasted past midnight. Anyway, my bio rhythms were screwed up with the time difference. I'd just have more cookies to tide me over. *"Oui, ça va."*

He leaned in for the kisses, and once again, we bumped noses.

I hoped the tree shadows would hide my flushing cheeks. "One of these days I'll get it right," I assured him. *Or else you'll need a nose splint.* But with no idea how to say "nose splint" in French, I left it there.

Still, he gave a warm laugh. "I am so glad that you are here," he said, like he truly meant it. Then he turned to leave, disappearing around the bend.

I let out a sigh of disbelief at my good fortune, then climbed to the top floor of my treehouse, feeling the echo of laughter. I explored the jars of beauty supplies on the vanity, smoothing almond

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oil infused with calendula over my face, then spreading mica-flecked hibiscus balm over my lips and the apples of my cheeks.

On impulse, I rummaged through my bag and pulled out my one nice article of clothing—a wrinkled little black dress, simple cotton jersey, short enough to show my knees, with a neckline that revealed some cleavage. Of course, Raphaël and the others would discover the frumpiness of my wardrobe soon enough, but at least for this night, what might happen if I played at being the maiden and not the crone?

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About the Author

Photo by Tina Wood

Laura Resau is the author of *The Alchemy of Flowers*, her debut novel for adults, and eleven acclaimed books for young people. Her novels won five Colorado Book Awards and appear on best-of booklists from Oprah, the American Library Association, and more. Trilingual and with a cultural anthropology background, she's lived in Provence and Oaxaca, and now teaches creative writing at Western Colorado University. You might find her writing in her cozy vintage trailer in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she lives with her rock-hound husband, musician son, wild husky, a garden of healing flowers, and a hundred house plants.

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