The Disenchantment

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To V. & W.
without whom this book might not have been written

Pour la propriété des moeurs, le poète doit considerer qu'il ne faut jamais introduire sans nécessité absolut, ni un fille vaillante, ni une femme savant, ni un valet judicieux. Car encore ces parties se recontrent quelquefois en ce sexe et dans ce métier, il est néanmoins veritable qu'il y a peu de Sapphos, encore aussi peu d'Amazons.

Jules de La Mesnardière, *La Poétique*, 1640

I

The Stone Bride

Chapter One

It was the first sitting. The portrait was conventional, and yet Alain Lavoie was nervous as, with his brush and palette, he attempted to turn the chaos of life into ordered forms of light and shadow. Hôtel Cardonnoy was a grand house, and it bristled with servants – a Swiss guard at the main gate, two lackeys in gold braid standing watch outside the door of the room in which Lavoie now worked. When he had arrived he'd half expected the guard to see his shabby rented carriage and turn him back at the gate. Now the baronne's lady's maid kept watch on a stool with a copy of *Le Mercure galant* open on her lap. She mouthed the words as she read, sounding them out silently. Some noblewomen had their girls read aloud while he painted, to make the time pass more quickly. Marie Catherine la Jumelle, Baronne de Cardonnoy, was not one of these. She stood silent and straight as a sword in the centre of the room, looking into the light with an expression of sweet contemplation – the face of a woman, Lavoie thought, who was imagining her own beauty from the outside.

For himself, Lavoie was attempting not to show how the wealth of the room discomforted him. It always happened like that at the beginning of a new sitting – he'd spend an hour worrying over whether his subjects would notice the worn collar on his silk coat, before his work had the opportunity to speak for itself. It was difficult to feel self-assured in a room with so much gilding on the furniture, even though Lavoie had painted the baron himself six months ago.

The baronne's right hand rested lightly on her young son's shoulder. Her daughter stood at her left side. The children were perhaps six and nine, and both had reached the point of the sitting where they had begun to fidget. Lavoie disliked painting children. They didn't know how to stand still, and the children of the rich were often little monsters, raised permissively by servants and then summoned to pose for hours with parents who were unpredictable strangers.

Only the baronne, her children and the fresh beam of light they stood in appeared on the canvas. Behind them he had outlined the shadow of a heavy column, and beyond that, the first strokes of manicured woodland, as if Madame de Cardonnoy and her children stood in a Roman ruin growing back into the gentlest kind of wildness, with no breeze to stir the confection of lace flounces on Madame's full skirt or mud to dirty the children's shoes. Lavoie could see the scene in his mind, superimposed on the room, although the canvas showed only a few bare lines over the blue field of *imprimatura*. The scent of Madame de Cardonnoy's perfume, which floated through the room and mingled with the sharp smell of his paints, might have been blowing off the imaginary arbour.

He would soften the light around her face and draw it through the expertly arranged fawn-coloured curls on her head, returning to her some of the glow that she would have had as a young girl. Now, in her early thirties, she was still lovely, in a slightly creased, pensive way that Lavoie would have liked to paint. But the baron would be happier if Lavoie made her look like a teenaged shepherdess. She might even appreciate that too, if she was sensible to flattery.

He had blocked in Madame de Cardonnoy's face, the shell-shape of her hand resting on the boy's shoulder. The blue *imprimatura* reflected through the layer of colour like the glimpse of a vein showing through skin. The boy, a blond child with a bit of a rat face, was twisting back and forth, wringing his mouth into stretched-out shapes like wet washing. The girl, older and more able to keep still, shot a look at her brother that was half condescension and half envy. She was dressed like a fashion doll, in imitation of her mother, the green ribbons on her cream skirt clearly chosen to match the grass-coloured silk of her mother's gown. One of her hands kept

digging surreptitiously behind her in her skirt, where something must have itched. She never put the hand back in the same place, once she was done scratching – sometimes she folded her arms neatly in front of her, and sometimes she made a fist in the fabric of her dress. Lavoie decided that he would paint the arm tucked demurely behind her back.

The part of his mind that wasn't occupied with the canvas was doing sums in his head, comparing the cost of the little girl's dress to that of his own silk jacket, which he wore only on professional visits and spent his Sundays washing the paint stains out of. Did the Cardonnoy girl have six dresses like the one she was wearing, or had this one been ordered specially for the painting? Surely her mother, who came from a bourgeois family and had married a baron, must have come with an enormous dowry. Beauty didn't mean much for that kind of marriage. Lavoie had heard that it was her financier father's money that had purchased this hôtel.

The boy was now rocking from his toes to his heels, bending at the waist as if he was being pulled back and forth on a string.

'Please, if you could keep him still, Madame,' Lavoie murmured.

'Nicolas, hush. Stand straight.'

Lavoie had expected her to pinch the child's ear to enforce the command. The most unruly and spoilt children, he found, often lived in fear of their mother. A nursemaid would allow them to gallop around the nursery and break their toys, but the lady of the house still expected them to be polite and presentable before her friends. '*Look how gallant he is*,' they might say of a little boy. '*Come now, darling, bow and kiss the comtesse's hand!*' And if the child didn't behave, he'd be slapped, to teach him manners. It wasn't that Lavoie had never been slapped during the years of his apprenticeship, but the way these fine ladies lost their polished mannerisms the instant a child disobeyed unsettled him.

So it surprised him when she smiled at her son and patted his hair with her hand. No part of her, except her hand and the wrist attached to it, moved – it was like watching a puppet's hand, pulled smoothly through the air on a string.

'If you like,' she said, 'I'll tell you a story to make the time pass faster. But you must stand perfectly still.'

The boy sighed at this, and the girl straightened up and folded

her hands neatly in front of her, her face turning eagerly back towards her mother.

'Can we have the one about the girl under the peapod, Maman?' she asked, and the corner of Madame de Cardonnoy's mouth turned up. Her expression had been so poised that Lavoie had not realised that her polished smile did not reach her eyes. Now it did, and he saw the difference.

'Don't forget to look at Monsieur Lavoie, Sophie,' the baronne said. 'The story I'm going to tell you is one that you haven't heard before, but my mother told it to me.'

'Are there ogres in it?' the boy asked.

'Of course there are.' Madame de Cardonnoy raised her eyes to Lavoie and gave him another of those secret smiles. 'That is, if you don't mind listening to a children's story, Monsieur Lavoie.'

'Of course not,' he said. He returned the baronne's smile only belatedly, and with a feeling approaching dread. Occasionally he painted some wrinkled Parisian lady with grandchildren who expected him to entertain her by flirting. The baronne was not in that category. If he offended her, her servants would throw him out onto the street and he'd lose his commission.

'Good.' Madame de Cardonnoy's hand moved, just slightly, caressing her son's shoulder. The boy held himself quietly. The lady's maid was fidgeting with the pages of her book. Lavoie dabbed his brush in shadow and began sketching in the features of the son's expectant face while he was, for the moment, holding still.

'Once, in a place far from Paris,' she began, 'there was a travelling man, who, having wandered far and wide, came to a village that stood in the shadow of a great, dark wood. He had nothing more than the clothes on his back and a bag of tools, and he was tired and hungry.'

She held herself almost supernaturally still as she spoke. At the beginning of the sitting, Lavoie had assumed that her composure was the result of dullness or lethargy, but now she seemed to be animated by some emotion that she kept in check only through great self-control. Even her expression barely changed, and when she paused for emphasis, only her eyes moved, gliding from the point on the far wall where they'd been fixed to Lavoie himself, as if silently appraising him. The effect was of a woman trapped inside

a sculpture, only her living eyes betraying that she was about to step down from her pedestal.

'But when he walked into the town square,' Madame de Cardonnoy went on, 'he found that the people drew back from him and barred their doors. There were no young women in the streets and no young men, but only sad and fearful old people, hurrying from doorstep to doorstep as if they feared to let the sun touch them. Finally the travelling man caught an old woman by the arm and asked her what made the village people so unfriendly to a stranger, and she told him that the village was under the rule of an ogre who lived deep in the wood.'

If he had been painting the portrait according to his own designs, and not according to custom, Lavoie would have liked to show the way the boy's head tilted upwards to watch his mother speak, his mouth hanging slightly open, as if he could look through her face and into the scene that she was describing. Instead, he outlined his face half from memory, looking straight out from the canvas.

'When the moon was new,' Marie Catherine continued, 'the ogre would ride out of the forest on a horse whose hooves struck fire from the earth, and when he came to the village he would demand a young woman for his bride. These wives never lived long, for the ogre's thirst for blood was such that on his very wedding night he would devour them, and soon after he would ride out again, to take another bride by force. Now there were few girls left in the village, and the remaining villagers kept their daughters under lock and key. The old woman could only advise that the travelling man continue on and seek his fortune somewhere else.'

Nicolas was leaning back against his mother's legs now. She put her hand on the back of his head and gently turned his face until he was once more watching Lavoie. Her daughter had remained surprisingly still since the story's beginning. Even the murdered wives didn't seem to frighten her.

'But,' Madame de Cardonnoy said, 'the travelling man refused to go. "Perhaps I can help more than you know," he said, and then he asked the woman for a large block of white stone and some water to drink, and when she brought him these things, in some bemusement, he took a chisel from his belt and began to chip away at the stone, humming all the while. For seven days he stood thus

in the town square, and the townspeople peered at him fearfully from their windows, and some brought him bread and meat to eat when he was famished. And at the end of seven days, what had emerged from the block of stone was a statue of a woman so life-like that it seemed the breeze was blowing the finest hairs away from her cheek, and her eyes of white stone were overflowing with real tears.'

The earlier impression that Lavoie had had of Madame de Cardonnoy as a speaking statue had been so distinct that for a moment he felt as if she had been looking into his thoughts. He left the boy's face with his brush and tried to get an impression of her eyes, the way the sun fell over her forehead and pulled a veil of light over her hair.

'The sculptor – I think we shall call him that, instead of the travelling man – held out his hand, and the stone statue took it and let him help her down off the pedestal. For although she was stone, she lived.'

Lavoie raised an eyebrow at her. It was the first slip in his painstakingly correct manners, and Madame de Cardonnoy had to suppress a laugh. He was still a young man, perhaps not quite thirty, and it was clear that he found the portrait a little boring. She thought it had only just occurred to him that she might have chosen the subject of the tale to flatter him, as well as to entertain the children.

'"Look," said the sculptor to the villagers. "I have made you a woman to give to the ogre. Send her to him and he will be satisfied, for she is made of cold stone and cannot be harmed by his appetites."'

A shiver passed through the children. Nicolas, hungry as he was for stories about ogres and dragons, was easily frightened.

'The villagers were afraid,' she said, 'for none of them had ever seen such magic, but for the first time they felt some hope in the face of their fate, and so they dressed the stone woman in a gown of red silk – the best that any of them had, the best their daughters had left behind – and they combed and plaited her white stone hair, and put slippers on her feet, and then the oldest of the men took her by the hand and led her to the forest's edge, where he thanked her and left her in the shadow of the trees.'

Now she had reached the part of the story that she hadn't yet invented. She watched the painter, whose gaze was focused carefully on his canvas, and she went on.

'The stone woman had been silent as they dressed her, and she was silent still. For a moment she hesitated beneath the trees, but she knew the purpose for which she had been made, and so she gathered her skirts up in one hand and took the first steps into the forest. The woods were dark, although it was bright day outside, and silent, as if even the birds of the wood feared to nest in the shadow of the ogre's house.'

She paused for a moment to catch her breath and collect her thoughts.

'But what happened next?' asked Nicolas.

Sophie shifted restlessly against her other side. Madame de Cardonnoy could feel her own back beginning to ache with the effort of maintaining her posture, but it was no worse than dancing at a ball or attending the court. One of her stays poked into the soft skin under her arm.

'She walked among the trees,' Madame de Cardonnoy said, 'until she came upon a path through the forest that had been carved by some creature's enormous footsteps, and on the path were the bones and the rusted sword of a man who must also have tried, in his own way, to end the ogre's reign.'

Nicolas swayed on his feet and sucked in his breath. Sophie, older and more sure that stories, as a rule, ended happily, let out a little sigh that rocked her shoulders up and down. Madame de Cardonnoy found herself glancing conspiratorially at the painter, whose lips were pressed together in concentration. He blushed when he looked up from his work and saw her watching him back, as he'd been watching her. She smiled.

'Was she afraid then?' he asked. He'd lost his tone of professional solicitousness.

It was funny how quickly inclination could move her towards someone. Monsieur Lavoie had seemed unremarkable when he arrived, with his easel and paintbox under his arm, but his obvious curiosity for the end of the tale charmed her and made the sharp lines of his face more appealing. There was something birdlike about the way his hands flew and pecked at the canvas.

'No,' said Madame de Cardonnoy. 'She wasn't afraid. For her heart, too, was made of stone, so that both fear and pity were beyond her.'

'I think many would call that a dangerous gift for a woman,' said Lavoie.

'The stone bride followed the path deep into the woods. She had walked for some time when she came to a gate, on which a gnarled face guarded the keyhole. Beyond the gate was a garden and a great house, but although the leaves of the trees shone silver, and the gate was made of the purest gold, all of this beauty was spoiled, because the fountains and the meandering streams of the garden flowed with red blood instead of water, and the roses bloomed black under its influence and gave shelter to only bats and wasps, where there should have been songbirds and hard-working honeybees.'

Outside, a fast-moving cloud was passing over the sun, or else she had lost track of the time, despite her sore feet and the ache starting in her back. The children were fidgeting again, and Sophie's shoulders slumped dejectedly. At nine, she was old enough to wear stays, like her mother, but she hadn't yet learned to ignore her discomfort. Madame de Cardonnoy could hear the fussy huffs of her breath as she leaned against her mother's side for support.

The room was growing dim. Madame de Cardonnoy took a breath.

'At that moment the stone woman heard footsteps behind her, so heavy that they shook the earth, and a shadow fell over the gate. Slowly she turned and, dropping into her lowest curtsey, she murmured, "Good evening, husband." For the ogre had come home for the evening.'

She let go of Nicolas's shoulder. Stepping forward, out of the tableau, was like crossing an invisible threshold. She noticed for the first time that there was a trickle of cold sweat running down her back, as if she had lived the story and not just told it.

'And there, I think, we should stop. Monsieur Lavoie, I'm certain you're losing your light.'

'A little, Madame,' he admitted. He was already packing his brushes into their box. The children slouched like dolls where she'd left them. Nicolas whined softly that he wanted to hear what the ogre looked like.

'Will you finish the story tonight, Maman?' Sophie asked.

'Of course, darling.' Madame de Cardonnoy turned to her lady's maid. 'Will you take them up to the nursery, Jeanne?'

The light in the room now was dim and golden, and the smell of the paints seemed to have intensified. Sharp, like freshly mown hay, and even, Madame de Cardonnoy thought for a moment, the rank smell of the sizing in the canvas. Jeanne herded the children away.

'I hope you weren't too bored by the story, Monsieur Lavoie. You know one must find some way of keeping the children quiet.'

'Of course not, Madame,' said Lavoie, wiping his hands down with a cloth and turpentine. 'I was fascinated. You're lucky to have such an inheritance of stories from your mother.'

Madame de Cardonnoy smiled and gently shook her head.

'On the contrary, I'm afraid. My mother wasn't the type to tell stories. I make them up myself.'

'Is that a secret, Madame? You gave your mother the credit when you began.' The painter had stored his paints away neatly in his box. The easel he moved near to the wall, where it would stand, to avoid smudging the paint as it dried. The canvas showed a series of blurry forms coming into being – the green shadows of Madame de Cardonnoy's dress, ribbons and lace just a vague suggestion of shadow. Her face he had worked more completely, and she saw herself younger, pink and pale, as if she was looking into a smudged mirror. He'd painted her with her lips a little parted, as if in the moment before she was about to speak.

'They're just children's stories,' Madame de Cardonnoy said. 'Mother Goose tales. There's nothing to take credit for.'

Lavoie bowed.

'Still, I'd like to hear the end of that one, some day.'

There was a wistful tone in his voice. Madame de Cardonnoy held out her hand.

'Perhaps at the next sitting,' she said, and then she called the Swiss guard to see the painter out.

A carriage had overturned near the Church of Saint-Sulpice. Lavoie, walking on foot from Hôtel Cardonnoy in the brisk wind,

heard the squeals of the horses first, and then the sound of a woman cursing, calling, *Foutu, jaufort, fils de putain.* The overturned carriage, a rented fiacre, had collided with some nobleman's gilded coach, and now the poor scabby horses lay tangled in their traces, crying as they tried to free themselves and regain their feet. The woman who was cursing like a fishwife was still trapped inside the fiacre and was trying to prise the door wide enough that she could crawl out through the half-frozen mud. She flopped out into the street like an eel, her curls in disarray. Half the street had stopped to watch, and the others skated uneasily around the gathering crowd, on their way to some other business. Lavoie stopped too.

One would have thought the woman was a countess if it hadn't been for the cheap rented carriage and the way she cursed. Could one render it in paint, he wondered, the way her doll-like exterior creased and revealed the history of the woman beneath it: the bourgeois wife, or the shopkeeper dressed above her station, or the whore? The second, gilded carriage had a cracked wheel and a doughy face pressed against its glass window, watching the scene intently. The gold-braided coachman jumped down from his post and walked to where the driver of the fiacre was trading insults with the woman who had been his passenger as he tried to untangle his horses. The fiacre's driver was pulling one struggling horse by its hoof and trying to dodge the flailing morass of the other legs long enough to unbuckle the harness. He didn't see the other coachman's whip until the uniformed lackey had already raised his arm over his head, and then the woman who'd been his passenger screamed at him to watch his back, and he half turned, sneering, and the whip caught him across the shoulder and chin and knocked him back into the horses' legs.

The servant didn't seem to care whether he hit man or horses. They were churning together in a froth of mud, and then the fiacre's driver found his hands and knees and crawled ratlike out of the nest of hooves, the blows of the whip still raining down on his head and the hands that protected his face. The lackey's face was twisted with rage, as if he imagined he could avenge every insult he had ever received on the body of this coachman, if he could only beat him until he was one with the dirt.

Lavoie had the strange feeling that he had turned into nothing more than a giant eyeball. It happened sometimes when he was painting, this feeling of a being a screen onto which the world was projected, in all its terrible colours. He could not move, although he saw the blood on the coachman's face and the way the crowd was murmuring – those who stood on the fringes dispersing and hurrying away, while the rest tightened in a knot around the carriages, blocking the road and knotting their hands into fists, the smell of horse shit and blood hanging over the street like an evil fog. The churned mud itself looked like a palette slick with badly mixed paint.

The woman passenger was now cursing both coachman and lackey interchangeably, and finally she darted between them and shoved the lackey, who spun with a snarl and snapped the whip at her face. She flinched, but then in the instant after the flinch she had stepped still closer to him, so near that he could have reached out with his gloved hand and slapped her.

'You're brave, aren't you? Hit me then!' she cried, so angrily that Lavoie could see the teeth shining wetly in her mouth. She gestured at the gathering crowd. Other carriages had stopped now, their coachmen jumping down to see what commotion was blocking the road. 'Fils de putain, do you think that no one here will come help me?'

'That's enough.' The door of the gilded carriage had cracked open, and from it came a man's voice and one extended hand. The passenger waved to his servant, and the lackey slumped, as if a string that suspended him had been cut, and slouched back towards the carriage. His gold braid was spattered with mud, like the rest of the road. Lavoie turned and walked away before the servant reached his master.

But the scene stayed with him, superimposed on the road as he walked, displacing the hanging signs, the women selling vegetables from window stalls, all the noise and movement of the city. He was sweating, even in the half chill of the February thaw. He saw the nobleman's hand extended languorously from his coach, beckoning, and somehow the image recalled another – the marriage of the ogre, as Madame de Cardonnoy had told it, the brides abducted in the night and the woman made of stone, with her cold heart and

hands. It seemed like a darker tale, now, than when he had first heard it, not really a tale for children, and yet it fascinated him. As the baron's wife, Lavoie could admit, had fascinated him.

Didn't her story reveal something about her own marriage? Perhaps it seemed that way only because he wished to believe that she had told him a secret. Lavoie didn't know if it had been a slip in her self-control or just a game that she was playing with him. And he wasn't sure if the guilt that he felt came from his attraction – a woman above his station, the wife of a man who had hired him – or from the fact that he had stood by while the lackey beat the fiacre's driver and, until the woman turned to the crowd for help, it had never occurred to him to intervene.

There had been no reason for him to make it his business.

He could have hailed a rented carriage and taken it back to his home, but he instead he walked a long way, until the cold bit him through his coat and made him shiver. He wanted to forget the carriage driver and Madame de Cardonnoy and think instead of his work hanging in that fine hall, in the salons of Paris, in the palace at the Tuileries itself, lit by the glitter of a crystal chandelier. On the boulevard he passed one of the new shops that sold coffee and sweets, and he lingered outside the window in a cloud of the bittersweet smell. His ears stung from the cold.

The city would wash the image of the lackey and the whip from his eyes. A seamstress dressed in grey grisette was stitching ruffles onto a hem in a shop window, her dress of cheap cloth cut in a startlingly elegant silhouette, so that she was herself the advertisement for her skills. He bought a packet of hot chestnuts from a man on the street corner, more for the scent and to keep his hands warm than because he was hungry. When he looked upwards, the street signs formed a barricade against the winter sky, a jumble of giant-sized household paraphernalia suspended from the face of each building – boots and fish and loaves of bread, cart wheels and wigs and hands brandishing pistols. All clanking on their hinges when a breeze passed the rooftops. Paris, conglomeration of senseless objects, where the gutters flooded when it rained and carried diamonds and old fish alike in their current.

As the sun began to set, Lavoie was shivering and had thought better of his impulsive decision to walk, but he was nearly home,

and the fiacre that he had tried to hail did not stop for him. He could feel the shape of the frozen cobbles through the soles of his boots.

When he arrived on his street, the signal bell that sounded the arrival of the lamplighter was ringing. The lanterns crawled down the walls on their pulleys and then rose up again, a candle burning steady inside each glass cage. Those men and women out on the street stopped to watch, and Lavoie stopped with them, while the busiest souls bustled past the waiting bodies in their hurry to get wherever they had to be. A young woman in a white bonnet leaned out of an upper window and watched the shadows cast by the rising flames stretch and recede below her. Her face was coloured warm and ruddy by the candlelight, and her bonnet was tinged with the deep blue of the sky overhead, in which there was, as yet, not a single cloud.

Madame de Cardonnoy had planned to meet Victoire at the Hôtel de Bourgogne after dinner. They had not met for a week, and nervousness and excitement dampened her appetite as she ate alone in her room before the play. The baron was away at Versailles. Jeanne had folded up the white cloth that held her toilette, so that she could dine off her table. She had specified nothing for dinner, and the cook had sent up a dish of stewed leeks flavoured with milk and lemon peel and a dish of baked sole. He often skimped when her husband was away, and she thought the bread had gone stale. She could feel the meeting with Victoire hanging over her, making her sick with anticipation.

In winter the sun set early. Jeanne helped her into her evening clothes – silk stockings with little Chinese figures hand-painted on them, and a blue silk mantua that swirled loosely around her body, clinging at the waist and gaping at the chest to show the barest hint of her shift. The sleeves billowed out at the arms and buttoned tightly at her wrists with gold buttons. She had Jeanne pin up her skirt, so that a flash of the painted stockings would show when she stepped out of the carriage, or when she climbed the stairs of the theatre. Finally she took a pinch of argentine and threw it up in the air, so that it fell in a glimmering snow over her hair and tinted her

brown curls silver. Jeanne dusted the excess powder off her mantua with a handkerchief.

There was a delight in the clothes that she never stopped feeling. She judged herself a little for her vanity. Whatever Victoire loved in her, it wasn't the slenderness of her waist – not after years of child-bearing. Jeanne laced and buttoned her and pulled and tucked the fabric of her skirt so that it would fall in the most flattering way, and Marie Catherine caught a glimpse of her own face and neck in the mirror on the wall and felt as if she had never been so fully herself. The baron would have disapproved of the mantua, if she'd worn it to dine with him – of the loose, billowing fabric and the glimpse of white lace that peeked through the neckline. '*Is that what I paid your couturière so much money for?*' he'd say. '*You look like you're going to bed.*'

And his tone of voice would have suggested exactly what he meant by that.

His imaginary words rang in her head as Anne, the children's nursemaid, brought Sophie and Nicolas down to kiss her goodnight before bed. Marie Catherine pulled her skirt a little higher and spun, so that they could see the dancing figures on her stockings.

'It's like you're wearing a painting,' said Nicolas. There was something envious in his voice as Anne picked him up to carry him away to the nursery. 'I'd like to have ones like that when I'm old.'

She sent Jeanne out to call the carriage around and put on her cloak. She shouldn't have called the children down to see her off, when she was dressed for her lover. But she found she didn't care. The anticipation blunted the guilt, as if she'd drunk too much wine and the spirit was rushing through her, pulling her off her feet.

She had married the baron young. He had been her father's choice, but she hadn't rejected him, although he was twice her age, thirty to her fifteen. They had met in Madame de Fontet's salon, when she had been a gawky girl with big feet who stumbled over witty conversation and blushed when men looked at her. Of course she had been flattered when Monsieur de Cardonnoy paid her court. She remembered her deep embarrassment at her mother's accent, when she went calling on her arm. Marie Catherine's father had been a financier, who made his fortune from the salt tax and then purchased the title that would ensure his daughter's

advancement, the convent education that made her speak as finely as any lady of the court and the dowry that would let her marry a man with an older, more noble name. Her father had planned and studied to live his life in the court – his manners were as polished as any other nobleman's. But her mother, despite her lovely hair and her eye for clothes, spoke like a shopkeeper, and wrote letters in a crabbed hand full of eccentric spellings. Marie Catherine had seen ladies laugh behind their hands when she spoke. Her father sometimes laughed to her face.

'*You can dress a pig in silk,*' he'd say, '*but you can't teach it to speak French.*'

Her marriage to the Baron de Cardonnoy had seemed like triumph. Her father had wanted it ardently – more, almost, than any of the other honours to which he had risen. Marie Catherine was his only living child. The baron was older than she was, but he was not an old man, and he had been kind to her, at first. Was still kind, by some standards. Madame de Cardonnoy knew women who lived in their husbands' houses like prisoners of their servants, afraid to ask for even a glass of water.

Jeanne was waiting for her by the carriage, in a purple cast-off dress that had once belonged to Marie Catherine herself. The street lamps were lit for the evening. Marie Catherine settled into her seat and leaned into the glass window of the carriage, as close as she could without mussing the curls on her forehead, listening to the cries of coachmen fighting for the right of way, the rattle of the wheels on stone. Two girls in fine dresses stood on a street corner and attempted to negotiate with the greasy-looking driver of a public fiacre.

When she was a new bride, they had ridden to Versailles, when it was still only a hunting lodge and the construction of the palace was just beginning. They had danced in the gardens through the night alongside the rest of the court and lain down to sleep in the hay in all their finery and woken up dew-wet and danced again, as if they were under a spell. The king had styled the ball 'Les Plaisirs de l'Île Enchantée'. She had seen the king dancing with his mistress while the queen rested and drank the fennel-scented rossoly that the servants were passing around in glasses that fluted outwards like the shape of a woman's breast, and it had seemed that

the whole world and all of those brightly dressed dancers spun around the royal body, the way the earth spins around the sun. She had danced with the baron, she had gone home smelling like hay and the sweat of strange women, the taste of brandy and coriander lying thick and sour on the back of her throat. Then for a brief few days the fear of the married life stretching out before her had warmed into something sweeter, and she had thought that she might step out of her mother's world through a window and live in that enchanted island for ever, if only she could bring herself to take her husband's hand and pull him close.

Marie Catherine had done her father's bidding. During their courtship she had found the baron gracious, gentle with her, reserved and formal in the way that a gentleman was expected to be when he admired a lady. After the wedding he seemed to have decided that he had won as much of her affection as he required. She no longer found him gentle on the night of their marriage, when he took off her gown and looked at her body. She was close enough to him, for the first time, to discover that he had a rotten tooth in the back of his mouth that made his breath smell foul. At Versailles she had thought she might find it within herself to love him, in spite of all this, but, in the end, she did not.

The smell of the river rose up and wrapped the coach in a heavy cloud of dampness and sewage as the carriage crossed the Pont Neuf. She spied a few bedraggled white swans bedding down for the night under the bridge, their feathers gleaming in the darkness. The king had imported them to beautify the city a few years before, but now their white feathers were grey with mud, and it was said that he hated to see them.

Jeanne pulled out a handkerchief and held it across her nose, shifting ostentatiously on the cushion next to Marie Catherine. She was a country girl, and seemed always to be trying to convey her experience of the world, and her comfort in her hand-me-down clothes, by the great delicacy of her manners.

The summer after Marie Catherine's marriage, the Baron de Cardonnoy had torn down his family's decrepit hôtel and purchased the new Hôtel Cardonnoy in Saint-Germain-des-Prés with the money from his young bride's dowry. While the house was under construction they had travelled by coach in June to the Cardonnoy

estate, to set his family's affairs in order there and to plan for Marie Catherine's lying-in, for by the spring she was pregnant.

The baby was stillborn. It would take four years and three miscarriages before she conceived Sophie – who was, alas, a girl, when the baron needed a male heir. By then all the devotion she had tried to cultivate for her husband had faded. She would have paid a king's ransom out of the Cardonnoy coffers to never have had to sit across from him at dinner again. She slept in her own room at Hôtel Cardonnoy now, and she locked her door before she went to bed.

At twenty-two, pregnant again after Sophie with another child that she'd miscarry, she'd gone to her father and begged him to do something – anything – to free her, although she had known that the request would injure his sense of self more deeply than anything she had ever asked of him. To see her unhappy had always caused him pain. He had advised her to meekness and to prayer, to soften her husband's heart. Instead she had hardened her own. Perhaps she simply didn't love as some women did. She could not mend her defect. She was cold.

So Marie Catherine had quietly believed for years that she had been made with something lacking, and any spark of inclination that she might feel for a man in company was a short-lived thing that fizzled out after the first imaginary movement of love. Then she had met Victoire de Conti, had laughed with her in Madame de Fontet's salon and sat beside her in a coach, travelling through the city at night with only the hems of their skirts touching, and wondered what force had swept the veil off the city and pulled her heart into her mouth.

She didn't love as some women did.

When they reached the rue Mauconseil there was a crowd outside the theatre. The coachman jumped down from his seat, handed the reins to a man standing by and elbowed a way through the waiting patrons so that Madame de Cardonnoy and Jeanne could walk up the steps. It was freezing again. A few lacy flakes of snow drifted down over the crowd and melted on hats and gloves. A pair of itinerant coffee-sellers in white aprons had set up shop near the entrance, and the smell of their drink drifted over the crowd.

The Comédiens du Roi were performing a play they called *The Fortune-Teller, or The False Enchantments*. She had heard that the Lieutenant General of Police, Gabriel de la Reynie, had written part of it, and every night since the arrest of the Maréchal de Luxembourg and the flight of the Comtesse de Soissons there had been a crowd of hundreds outside the theatre, waiting in vain to get inside and steal a morsel of fact or fiction from the theatre's table. For both the maréchal, famous as he was on the battlefield, and the comtesse, although she had once been intimate with the king himself, were rumoured to have consorted with witches and dabbled in poison and black magic.

What people whispered was that some lords and ladies had been so anxious to lay hands on the money of their husbands and wives, sisters, brothers and even parents that they had resorted to poison to speed up the delivery of their inheritances. Rumour had it, also, that there were a great many men and women at the court who were biting their nails, waiting for the summons to appear before the Lieutenant General of Police at the Châtelet. Madame de Cardonnoy herself, though she had never frequented fortune-tellers, had gone to the same gatherings as the maréchal, where sometimes, as night fell and the lamps were lit, someone would usher in a magician who claimed to be able to divine a man's deepest wish by casting a little ball of wax in the fire. It was the kind of blasphemy that made ladies laugh and – she would have said, not so long ago – hurt no one.

Inside, the theatre was just as crowded. As Marie Catherine made her way to her box, greeting friends, leaning close to the Marquise de Courtanvaux, the Comtesse de Combois, she felt impatient. None of it mattered except Victoire, who might already be sitting in her box, expecting her. They were discussing the Princesse de Tingry, sister-in-law to the disgraced Maréchal de Luxembourg, who, they said, had been questioned so viciously about her brother-in-law's involvement in black magic that she had left her audience at the Chambre Ardente in tears. They said she'd been accused of incest.

Marie Catherine turned away. She knew the princesse, though not well, and she had heard this story already.

There was only one face that she wanted to see in the crowd.

She couldn't really feel sorrow for Mademoiselle de Tingry, not when she had Victoire's name on her tongue as she wandered through the bright gowns and brocade jackets. But her box, when she reached it, was empty. A heavy pendulum swung through her, from shoulders to pelvis. Maybe Victoire had been delayed at Versailles. She knew that her face was calm and showed nothing of her anger. A distant part of her was impressed by her own self-control.

The play was a limp curtain fluttering over the stage, the actors mincing through their jokes while the crowd shifted in their seats, laughing the laughter of the fearful, waiting for the play to explain the mystery of the sorcery, of the poisons that rumour placed in every cup. Which it could not do. Finally Marie Catherine put her head in her hands and let the weight of her hair bend her neck forward as if she were praying. When the curtain drew closed for the intermission, and still Victoire had not arrived, Marie Catherine felt fear drawing around her like a cold draught creeping under the curtain of her box. It was not like Victoire to leave her waiting with no explanation. She shouldn't be angry. Victoire's family was as noble as that of the Princesse de Tingry. But that might not protect her, not now.

After the intermission she sent Jeanne out to watch the hall from the door to her box. She would have left early, but she still hoped Victoire might appear. And if something had happened, wouldn't the gossip in the aisles have been about Victoire de Conti?

Two years ago they had met by chance at the Hôtel Bourgogne, on a night something like this. They had been the kind of acquaintances who might kiss each other on the cheek at Madame de Fontet's salon, but the younger girl would never have sat next to Marie Catherine long enough to really see her. And then Victoire had slipped into the Cardonnoy box during an intermission, laid the edge of her fan on Marie Catherine's neck, just beneath her jaw, and spoke in the voice of a highwayman. 'Excuse me, Madame, I'm fleeing a rude suitor. May I hide with you?' And, giggling, she'd crawled in her rose-coloured silk to Marie Catherine's knees, ducking her head as if she really were desperate to escape, the unfurling scent of her perfume betraying her hiding spot. Marie Catherine knew the girl who'd barged in on her was a cousin of the king, a Princess of the Blood, rich as Hades, with a wit that a man

could cut himself on. The offhand way she broke the rules of etiquette was thrilling. She hadn't even brought her maid into the box behind her. For a moment Marie Catherine had almost climbed down on the floor with her. Instead she threw her skirt over the girl's head and kept a breathless lookout, in case the errant suitor barged in.

'Forgive me for not introducing myself,' the girl said, once they had waited long enough that each was sure the coast was clear. 'I'm Mademoiselle de Conti.'

'I know who you are.'

And later that night, drinking coffee very late at Victoire's hôtel, with her heart still beating in her temples from the sudden feeling of adventure, Marie Catherine asked, 'Do you know when we first met? It wasn't in Madame de Fontet's salon. I don't think you'll remember, it was so long ago. Do you remember, when the palace at Versailles was first being constructed, that party the king held there? The guests came and slept in the hay. I was fifteen. And I remember a little girl with black hair who'd begged her mother to let her come, and although she was much too young, she was wearing a ballgown made to measure and was dancing with the highest lords of the land. A Princess of the Blood. You were the star of the ball, Mademoiselle de Conti. Until you stole a glass of spirits and had to be put to bed, sick, in the hay.'

Victoire looked startled. Now that Marie Catherine knew her better, she'd learned how much she hated to appear ridiculous. But she recovered and said, with the same air of the bandit as when she'd barged into the opera box, 'Wouldn't you know, the brandy erased even my memory of you?'

And she had leaned so close in the candlelight that Marie Catherine had jumped to her feet in fright and gone to look out of the window into the darkness. So close that it had seemed she knew the secret that Marie Catherine could not have spoken, even to herself. She could not have explained why she felt as she did – not motherly, not like a friend or a sister, but as if she had set the sleeve of her dress alight and the fire was consuming her, but without pain.

That was the first night, almost two years ago now. Tonight she left the theatre alone, with little memory of the play. Victoire had

sent no message to explain her absence, and Marie Catherine's fear was freezing back into anger.

You told me you would come and you did not come, she wrote by candlelight, much later, when she was dressed in her nightgown and she could hear the sound of Jeanne's sleeping breath from the alcove off her bedroom. *What kept you?* She folded the letter and sealed it. Then she thought better of it, broke the seal, opened the letter and tore it into pieces.

The next morning she woke, groggy and half rested, to the sound of a carriage in the courtyard below. It was late morning – the light coming through her window was as yellow as lemon peel. Her room smelled of candle smoke and her own sweat. She turned over under her blankets and listened to the stable boys calling to each other as they unhitched the horses.

The baron had returned from Versailles.