

CHARLOTTE LINK
The Rose Gardener

Book

The young teacher Franca Palmer is at the end of her rope. Her marriage is reaching a crisis point, and she barely feels capable of continuing to face the demands of her career, her husband, and day-to-day life. In a mad rush she leaves her comfortable home in Berlin and flees to the island of Guernsey in the English Channel; there she rents herself a room in the old rose gardener's house in the village of Le Variouf. In a short time, a peculiar, guarded friendship develops between her and her host, Beatrice Shaye. The older woman has lived on the charmingly situated property for many years with Helene Feldmann—tied together by fate in a relationship that is marked with repugnance and hatred. The two women appear to be bound to one another in a mysterious, incomprehensible way—dating back to the year 1940, when during the occupation of the Channel Islands by German troops, Helene and her husband Erich, a high-ranking officer, took Beatrice in as if she was their own child. From the beginning, the Feldmanns competed for Beatrice's favor, all the more so since, where his wife was concerned, Erich felt only contempt. So it was that with his death on May 1st, 1945, an agonizing phase in both women's lives came to an end. But nevertheless, a shadow still hangs over the house. And one day, another May 1st, there is again a death in Le Variouf.

Author

Charlotte Link, born in Frankfurt, is the most successful German author of the present day. Her psychological suspense novels have been translated into numerous languages and are international bestsellers. In Germany alone, over 24 million books by Charlotte Link have been sold to date. Charlotte Link lives with her family near Frankfurt.

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The Rose Gardener

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blanvalet

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PROLOGUE

There were times when she just couldn't stand roses. Times when she thought she could no longer bear their beauty; the sight of their soft, bright petals; the arrogance in their stretching towards the sun, as if the warmth of its rays was meant for them and them alone. Roses could be more sensitive than the proverbial mimosa; first it was too wet for them, then it was too cold, too windy, or too hot. Often, for some indiscernible reason, they would hang their heads and make you think they were getting ready to die—and it took effort, strength, and nerve to prevent them from doing just that. But then, just as inexplicably, they would reveal an unexpected tenacity. They would hold their own in the face of harsh weather and improper handling. They would blossom, thrive, and become fragrant. They made it easy on no one who had anything to do with them.

I shouldn't have such an aggressive reaction to roses, she thought. It's foolish. And unreasonable.

She had spent forty years of her life growing roses, but really, she had never had the right touch for handling them. This was probably because she didn't like these flowers and had actually always wanted to do something else. She had managed to develop a few interesting crossbreeds, hybrid teas mainly—for if it had to be roses, this was the variety she could bring herself to like at least a little bit. They combined

elegance with a certain hardiness and strength—and they sold well. Somehow she had always been able to secure a livelihood for her small family, but she had often thought that if some benevolent fairy was to appear all of a sudden and offer her a pile of gold, she wouldn't touch another rose for the rest of her life.

There were times when Beatrice Shaye faced up to the knowledge that she neither liked roses nor really understood how to handle them as an actual expert might. It was then that she asked herself *what it was*, exactly, that was near to her heart. Every now and again she had to reassure herself that there was still something, because there were times when she was saddened by the knowledge that she had given her life to an activity and an object that could summon so little sympathy from her. It set her to brooding, in search of some kind of meaning. This even though she herself had always voiced skepticism about those in search of meaning. She had always asserted that the meaning of life was just to *keep* living—which is to say, survival, in a plain, undramatic sense. Survival meant doing what was necessary: getting up, carrying out the work that needed to be done, eating, drinking, going to bed and going to sleep. Everything else was just for decoration: the sherry that shone in its glass like bright gold. Music that raged through the room and made your heart beat faster and your blood flow more freely. A book you couldn't put down. A sunset over the sea, down by Pleinmont Tower, that immediately touched the soul. A dog's nose, wet and cold and wild, pressed against your own. A quiet, warm summer day, its calm broken only by the cries of seagulls and the soft crashing of waves in Moulin Huet Bay. Hot stone under bare feet. The smell of lavender fields.

Actually, all these things were the answer to her ques-

tion: she loved Guernsey, her home, the island in the English Channel. She loved St. Peter Port, the picturesque port town on the east coast. She loved the narcissus flowers that bloomed along every path in the spring, loved the wild, blue hyacinths that you came upon in the bright forests, flooded with light. She loved the cliff path high above the ocean, especially the stretch that led from Pleinmont Point to Petit Bôt Bay. She loved her village, Le Variouf, loved her stone house, which lay high up on the upper edge of town. She loved even the island's wounds, the ugly watchtowers, once a part of the fortifications that had been built by the German occupation forces; the dreary, granite-hewn German Military Underground Hospital, that the captive laborers had had to build back then; and the train stations that the Germans had expanded in order to be able to transport material for the building of fortifications along the Siegfried line. Besides all this she loved the landscape, the things on this island that no one saw or heard other than she: memories of voices and images, of moments scorched into her memory, never to be extinguished. Memories of more than seventy years of life, almost all of which she had spent right here. Maybe what was near to your heart were the things you had known all your life. Whether for good or ill, the familiar worked its way into that corner of the heart where affection was born. At some point, you no longer asked what it was you had once wanted; rather, you considered what it was you had received. And you came to terms with it.

Naturally, she would think now and again about what her life in Cambridge had been like. The old university town in East Anglia came to mind particularly often on evenings such as this. It felt like she had sat on the harbor and drunk sherry—just as she had today—a thousand times, and this

feeling was like a symbol of her life—of the life that she had *instead* of the one in Cambridge. And instead of a possible life in France as well. If back then, after the war, she could have gone to France with Julien ...

But after all, she thought, bringing herself back to her senses, what good would it do to think so long on it? Things had gone the way that, perhaps, they had to. Every life was lousy with missed chances, with wasted opportunities, of this she was certain. Who could say of themselves that they had always been consistent and driven? That they had never compromised?

She had come to terms with the mistakes and errors of her existence. She had ordered them in among all the other events that had happened in her life, and there they got a bit lost in the crowd, grew faint and almost imperceptible. At times she managed to overlook them completely. There were even times when she managed to forget them.

As she understood it, this meant that she had come to terms with her life.

Just not with the roses.

And not with Helene.

The barman at *Le Nautique* in St. Peter Port approached the table by the window where the two old women were sitting.

“Two sherries, same as always?” He asked.

Beatrice and her friend Mae looked at him.

“Two sherries, same as always,” answered Beatrice. “And two salads. Avocado with orange.”

“With pleasure.” He hesitated. He was fond of chit-chat, and at this early hour—it wasn’t even six in the evening yet—not one other customer had ambled into the restaurant.

“Another ship’s been stolen,” he said in a low voice. “A big

white sailboat. *Heaven Can Wait*, she's called." He shook his head. "Strange name, wouldn't you say? But she'll scarce get to keep it, no more than she'll keep her pretty white color. They've long since repainted her, and I'll bet she already belongs to some Frenchman over on the mainland."

"Boat theft," said Beatrice, "is as old as the island itself. It happens, and will always happen. Who gets worked up about it anymore, really?"

"People shouldn't leave their boats unattended for weeks at a time," said the barman. He took an ashtray from a neighboring table, placed it before the two women, right next to the vase with the roses that adorned the room that week. He gestured towards the small white reservation plate. "I need the table at nine o'clock."

"We'll be long gone by then."

Le Nautique sat right on the harbor of St. Peter Port, the capital of the island of Guernsey. The restaurant's two large windows offered a wonderful view of the countless yachts that sat anchored there. You could even get the idea that you were sitting out among all the ships and were yourself part of the lively activity there.

From the restaurant, you could observe the people strolling along the wooden boardwalk; you could watch children and dogs at play, and far off in the distance you could just make out the large steamers that brought vacationers from the mainland. Sometimes the view was like a painting, brightly colored and unreal. Too beautiful, too perfect, like the photographs in a travel brochure.

It was Monday, August 30th, an evening full of sunshine and warmth and yet already noticeably touched with fall's approach. The air no longer had that gentle softness of sum-

mer. Now it was like crystal, cool and crisp. The wind carried along a dry aroma. The seagulls shot from sea to sky and then back down, calling wildly, as if they knew that autumn storms and cold weather were ahead of them, that soon sheets of heavy fog would lie over the island and make flying difficult. Summer could last for another ten days, maybe two weeks. Then it would be gone beyond recall.

The two women said little to each other. They agreed that the salad was excellent, as always. And that nothing beat a good sherry, especially if it came in champagne flutes, filled with generous pours, as it did here. Other than this, however, scarce anything was exchanged between them. Each seemed to be deep in her own thoughts.

Mae watched Beatrice closely. She could get away with this, since it was clear that her companion didn't notice a thing. She found the way Beatrice dressed to be totally inappropriate for a seventy-year-old woman, but there had already been countless discussions between them about this. None of them had borne any fruit. She lived in her jeans, which she would wear until they were threadbare. She paired them with washed-out T-shirts or shapeless sweaters, the sole advantage of which was that they kept their wearer warm in wind and bad weather. As for her white, curly hair, usually she just held it back with a plain rubber band.

Mae kept trying, though. She herself favored close-fitting, brightly-colored outfits, went to the hairdresser every fourteen days, and used makeup to try and hide the signs of aging. Undaunted, she sought to prod her friend into taking care with her appearance.

"You can't run around like a teenager anymore! We're both seventy years old, and we have to take this into account. Those jeans are simply too tight, and ..."

“That would only be awkward if I were fat.”

“...and these eternal tennis shoes of yours are ...”

“...the most practical thing you can wear if you’re on your feet all day.”

“Your sweater is covered in dog hair,” Mae said, reproachful and resigned at the same time. She knew that neither the dog hair nor the tennis shoes, nor yet the jeans, would change in the least.

Today, however, she didn’t say a thing. She had been Beatrice’s friend since they were both children. And she possessed finely-tuned antennae when it came to gauging the state of her friend’s psyche. Today, she could tell, Beatrice was not in a great mood. Unhappy thoughts seemed to be going through her head and it was better not to further irritate her by fussing over her appearance.

She has a good figure, Mae thought, you’ve got to envy her there. She doesn’t look to have gained an ounce since she was twenty. She knew Beatrice to be so lithe in the way she moved, it was as if the bodily ailments of old age were an invention, something made for others but not for her.

Mae thought of the stolen boat, the one the barman had just spoken of. *Heaven Can Wait*.

A truly peculiar name, she thought.

Beatrice looked out the window onto the harbor and took a sip of her sherry. She wasn’t watching what went on down below. She was completely lost in thought.

Mae finally broke the silence.

“How is Helene?” She asked.

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders. “Like she always is. She complains a lot, but in the end no one can really understand what it is that makes her existence so awful.”

“Maybe she doesn’t exactly understand it herself,” Mae said. “She’s simply gotten so used to complaining that she can no longer stop.”

Beatrice hated talking about Helene.

“How is Maya?” She inquired, to change the subject.

Mae always got nervous whenever anyone mentioned her granddaughter.

“I’m afraid it might be bad company she’s keeping,” she said. “I saw her together with a man recently, it made me shudder, it’s not every day you see a face that brutal. My God, I’d be so happy if it finally worked out between her and Alan!”

Beatrice didn’t like to talk about Alan, her son.

“We’ll see,” she replied. Her tone made it unmistakably clear to Mae that she did not wish to speak any further about this topic.

Mae quickly picked up on this as well, and so they again sat silently across from each other, ordered two more sherries and looked out at the soft last light of the fading August day.

And in this light, in the ever more quickly falling twilight, Beatrice suddenly thought she recognized someone whom she had last seen many years ago. A face in the crowd that drew her attention, that startled her and made her face grow pale. It lasted only a second, then she was already convinced that she was mistaken. But Mae had noticed the change in Beatrice.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

Beatrice creased her brow and turned from the window. In just these few moments it had gotten too dark. She couldn’t have seen anything anyway.

“I thought I might have seen someone just now...” she said.

“Whom?”

“Julien.”

“Julien? Our Julien?”

He was never *our Julien*, Beatrice thought angrily, but she took in Mae’s remark without comment.

“Yes. But I was probably mistaken. Why should he come to Guernsey?”

“My goodness, he has to have changed so much anyway,” said Mae. “He’s got to be eighty years old by now, right?”

“Seventy-seven.”

“Not much better. I can’t imagine that we’d even recognize him.” She giggled, and Beatrice asked herself what there was to giggle about. “And I’m afraid he wouldn’t recognize us two old bags, either.”

Beatrice said nothing. She looked out the window one more time. Even if she could still have seen anything, the man whom, for one breathless moment, she had taken for Julien would surely be long gone by now, swallowed up by the crowd.

A mistake, she thought. God knows my heart shouldn’t be racing like this on account of a mistake!

“Come on,” she said to Mae, “let’s pay and go home. I’m tired.”

“Alright then,” said Mae.

PART ONE

Every morning was the same. Beatrice's alarm clock rang at six o'clock. She gave herself five minutes to lie quietly and enjoy the warmth of her bed and the calm all around her, a calm interrupted by certain familiar sounds. Birds chirping in the yard. Sometimes, when the wind was right, the soft roar of the sea. A few floorboards creaked somewhere in the house, a dog scratched himself, a clock ticked. Then the door to Beatrice's bedroom opened up a crack as Misty stuck her nose inside. Misty's fur had the same lead-gray color as the fog that lay over Petit Bôt Bay in the fall, and for this reason the name had immediately come to mind when Beatrice first held the dog in her arms. As a puppy, Misty was nothing but big, clumsy paws, soft, bushy fur, and coal black button eyes that brimmed with life. Now she was the size of a small cow.

Misty ran up and jumped on the bed, which rocked and groaned under her weight. She snuggled up on the comforter, turned on her back and stuck all four legs in the air, and quickly licked Beatrice's face with her tongue, a sopping wet sign of affection, straight from the heart.

"Misty, off the bed," Beatrice commanded half-heartedly. Misty knew she didn't have to heed her master's protests, and stayed right where she was.

Beatrice's five minutes of tranquility were over. She stood up quickly, ignoring, as best she could, the light stiffness in

her joints that told her she was no longer as young as she sometimes felt. In no way did she want to become like Mae, who worried about her body day and night. She was constantly checking in on herself, going to the doctor every third day because she claimed something wasn't right with her insides. As Beatrice saw it, Mae's constant worrying was what caused her various ailments in the first place. But they had spoken of it all too often already, and neither woman had changed her opinion. Their friendship boiled down to a single image: the two of them standing across from one another, each shaking her head in astonishment.

While she was in the shower, Beatrice thought about what she would do that day. She could afford such thoughts, having withdrawn from the working life that earlier had dictated how she spent her days. She continued to look after her rose garden only for her own personal pleasure—though the word “pleasure” didn't quite convey the truth of the matter. But the roses were still there, after all, and so she looked after them. She would still sell a few every now and then, if someone, usually a tourist, came by and wanted to buy some. But she no longer advertised in industry magazines, and had stopped shipments completely. Furthermore, she no longer tried to breed new varieties. That she left to others. It had never been especially fun for her anyway. By the time she left the bathroom, she had usually thought of a hundred things that needed taking care of, and in her movements there was already the speed and impatience that were typical for her. It seemed that everything she did, she did in a hurry, and this was extremely stressful for most of the people who knew her.

Beatrice and her dogs went for a walk from half past six to half past seven. Besides Misty there were two other mutts, both large, both wild, both an indeterminate mixture

of breeds. Beatrice loved all dogs without exception, but she liked best to surround herself with those as big as small cows or ponies. The dogs charged off immediately, as soon as Beatrice had gotten the front door open. The house stood above the village of Le Variouf, and from it you could see out to the ocean. The surrounding landscape was made up of broad fields, with clumps of trees scattered among them. Streams pattered down to the sea, and here and there on their banks stood rickety old mills which in former times had been powered by the water. Stone walls enclosed expansive pastures where cattle and horses grazed. The air smelled of salt and water, of algae and sand. It grew cleaner, and the wind grew more crisp, the closer one came to the ocean. Soon Beatrice reached the cliff path and could see the water. There were only a few trees here, windswept and low. The path was hemmed in with wild thickets of thorn bushes. There were also blackberry bushes, hung with fat, ripe fruit. The dogs ran off barking loudly, animated by the sound of the seagulls and by the wind in their noses. They knew every inch of the ground here. Beatrice knew this and thought nothing of their risky leaps. She stopped on the rise overlooking the water and took a deep breath.

Though it was still early in the day, the sun had already pushed itself up above the eastern horizon. It cast red-tinged rays over the waves. The September day was warm and would be almost as hot as midsummer. All of the last week had already been unusually warm for this time of year. The heather on the high cliffs was tinged with red; down in the bay the sand shone brightly. Cormorants and terns rose into the sky for their first hunt of the day.

Beatrice continued down the path. Now and again she would pull a blackberry in passing and bite down with relish.

To a certain extent this was a means of distracting herself. These few early moments, walking high above the ocean, were among the most dangerous moments of her day. The path led to Petit Bôt Bay, a place bound up with too many memories. These were both good and bad—but that made little difference. In the bad memories, old frights were alive once more, and some of them, even now, had lost none of their power. As for the good memories, they held within them the knowledge that they could not be brought back, and the sadness of knowing that moments of happiness pass through our lives but cannot fix anchor there. Beatrice had long ago forbidden herself any stirring to self-pity, but there were times when she could not hold back the bitter thought that life hadn't brought her all too much happiness. Like when she thought of the ease and contentment Mae had always lived with—at least when she wasn't going around with made-up illnesses or dark forecasts for the future of the world. Mae had never had to suffer through a real tragedy; up to now the most painful event had been the death of her father, five years before. Aged ninety-two, he had had a heart attack while living in a pretty nursing home near London. The way Beatrice saw it, he had had a better twilight to his life, and an easier death, than plenty of other people. Mae had made it seem like she'd had to endure a tragedy, while her old mother, who remained at the home, alone, had accepted fate's blow with great dignity.

Mae's husband had lavished her with attention, her children had never disappointed her, and even her grandchildren had grown up to be shining model citizens. Except maybe for Maya, from whom no man on the island was safe—but even she might become an entirely respectable person once her turbulent phase was behind her. No, life had never really treated Mae badly.

And what about me? Beatrice asked herself. Has life treated me badly?

It was the question that came to mind almost every time, up here on the cliff path, and for this reason she sometimes thought it might be better to avoid the bay and its surrounding area. But up to now she had always succeeded in leaving the question unanswered. Again and again she repressed it, and every morning with a kind of furious spite she took the same path she had taken now for decades. She wouldn't let a few painful thoughts drive her away from it.

This morning, too, she pushed the question of her life's trials off to one side, and called to the dogs—time to head back. Helene was certain to be sitting up in bed already, waiting for her morning tea. Beatrice knew how impatiently she waited for her to return from her walk. Not that she would have been at all hungry or thirsty. But after a long night Helene was eager for another person she could whine and complain to. Helene cried a lot, she relished it, and similar to Mae she was also all too preoccupied by her countless little aches and pains. But while Mae had her happy and companionable sides as well, dissatisfaction and carping were often all there was to Helene.

“Come on, boys!” Beatrice called to the dogs—Misty being the only female among them, she simply lumped her in with the group—“we've got to get home and look after Helene.”

The dogs shot past in a pack and trotted ahead of Beatrice in the direction of the house. If the prospect of a wild romp by the sea had had them excited before, now they were drawn on by the expectation of a hearty breakfast at home.

They're always content, thought Beatrice, because what's important to them are the really simple things in life. They don't question anything. They simply live.

On the way back she walked even more quickly than on the way out, and by the time she had arrived back at home, she had shaken off all her painful thoughts.

The house sat in the morning light like a small, peaceful paradise. Its walls, made from the island's brown granite, were surrounded by roses, rhododendrons, and giant blue hydrangeas. The green window shutters stood wide open; only those over Helene's window on the second floor were closed. It was exactly 7:30. Everybody on Guernsey could have set their watches by Beatrice.

At ten minutes before eight o'clock Beatrice stepped into Helene's room. She carried a tray which held a cup of tea and a plate with two pieces of toast. It was true that Helene always claimed not to be able to eat anything in the morning, but later, in some secretive way, the bread had always vanished. Beatrice had asked about this once. Helene had answered that she had fed it to the birds, but Beatrice had only half believed this. Helene was thin and delicate, but by no means did she look emaciated, and it was clear that she secretly ate more than she let on.

She had turned on the lamp on the night table and sat propped up against her pillows. She had to have gotten up to go to the bathroom already, because her hair was brushed and on her lips was a glimmer of light pink lipstick. Beatrice asked herself, irritably, why it was that, since she had already gotten up, she was not also capable of opening the windows and the shutters. Her room—dark, stuffy, and warm—made Beatrice think of a crypt, and this was probably the exact impression that Helene wanted to give. She was eighty years old and could be somewhat forgetful and muddled at times, but she continued to prove herself re-

markably astute when it came to arousing sympathy in those around her.

Helene wanted people to feel sorry for her at all times, morning and night. She had not always been like this, Beatrice knew. Still, she had always had the tendency to abandon herself to her feelings of helplessness and to force those around her to respond with sympathy and compassion, to position themselves at her side, ready to help. This tendency had gotten stronger with the years, and by now there were only a few left who could put up with her emotional behavior.

“Good morning, Helene,” Beatrice said, placing the tray on a table next to the bed. “Did you sleep well?”

She knew the answer, and it came at once. “Oh, to be honest, I barely closed my eyes. All night long I was tossing and turning. More than once I turned on the light to try and read, but, well, weary as I am these days I simply couldn’t concentrate, and . . .”

“It is just too hot in here,” Beatrice interrupted her. After less than a minute in the room’s musty, muggy air she felt like she couldn’t breathe. “Why you sleep with your windows closed in the middle of summer I will never understand.”

“It’s not summer anymore! Today is September Second!”

“It’s as hot as it is in summer!”

“I’m afraid that someone could climb in here,” Helene said despondently.

Beatrice let out a sound of contempt. “Alright, Helene, really now: how is that supposed to happen? There’s nothing there for someone to climb up onto!”

“The wall isn’t completely smooth. A skillful cat burglar could . . .”

Beatrice opened the window and threw the shutters out wide. Soft and fresh, the morning breeze poured into the

room. "For as long as I can remember, Helene, I've slept with my windows open. And never once has anyone climbed inside. Not even in the years when I was young and might have been glad for it to happen," she added, trying to make a joke in order to soften the anger that had likely entered her voice.

Helene did not smile. She squinted in the sudden brightness, reached for her tea cup, took a sip. "What do you have planned for today?" She asked.

"This morning I wanted to look after the garden. This afternoon I'm going to meet Mae. In St. Peter Port."

"Oh?" Helene's voice sounded hopeful. Sometimes Mae and Beatrice took her along when they were meeting somewhere on the island to go shopping or to go for a walk, and Helene loved to be together with Mae. Mae was always considerate with her, was more caring and warm-hearted with her than Beatrice was. She asked how she was and listened patiently to all of her complaints, taking in every last detail. She never got irritated and talked over her, as Beatrice often did; she never made her feel she was a burdensome old person who only ever got on other people's nerves. Mae was always charming and nice. Unfortunately she rarely got to choose what happened: it was usually up to Beatrice, and she was hardly ever keen to take Helene with her anywhere.

Nor did she respond to the questioning "Oh?" this time, but rather busied herself around the room, put away Helene's dirty linen from yesterday, got clean clothes from the chest of drawers and placed them on a chair.

"What are you going to do in St. Peter Port?" Helene kept at it. "Meet for coffee?"

"I never drive somewhere just to meet for coffee, Helene, you know that!" said Beatrice impatiently. "No, we've got various things to take care of. Maya will be there, she's to pick

out a birthday gift for herself that Mae wants to buy her, and she'll be getting something small from me as well."

"But Maya's birthday isn't until next month," grumbled Helene. She had mixed feelings towards Mae's granddaughter, but she made an attempt to sound neutral. "How old will she be then?"

"Twenty-two. She wants to have a party, and she would like to have something to wear for the occasion that is so sexy that men are drawn to it like bees are to honey—that's how she put it, anyway."

Helene sighed. A respectable woman could have only contempt for Maya's promiscuous way of life. But there were times when, to her great bewilderment, she discovered a sliver of envy. It was somewhere between all the layers of disapproval and indignation, not to mention moral self-satisfaction at the thought that Maya did at least sometimes receive her comeuppance for her uninhibited excesses—be it in the form of a black eye from a jealous lover or a painful procedure to do away with the unwanted result of a nightly assignation. Maya had had two abortions already—or at any rate, two that Helene knew of; there might have been more. Mae had confided in Helene that Maya was world champion when it came to forgetting to take the pill on time. Helene told herself that on all of Guernsey—and on the neighboring islands as well—there was probably no man to be found who would ever be willing to marry Maya, a woman who had taken up with almost every man who crossed her path. And so, truly, there was no reason to be envious! Nevertheless, there was something there that gnawed at her at times. She couldn't explain where the feeling came from, and perhaps she didn't want to know where it came from either. When it came to questions like this, knowledge would have meant

only pain. Even if she took into account the fact that she had been young in a different era and that life back then had been ordered around a different set of values, still now and again she couldn't help but make comparisons between the young *Helene* and the young *Maya*. And every time this stirred up a strangely intense pain within her.

You could have had more from life, if you had *taken* more, a harsh voice within her had said once, and since then this voice had never been entirely quiet.

"I'd like to give Maya something," she said quickly. "I'll come with you all, and she can pick something out."

Beatrice sighed. She had known that Helene would try this again.

"Helene, you don't want to give Maya a single thing, and what's more, no one expects you to," she said. "You don't like Maya much, and you're well within your rights to do so. You don't have to make like things are different just because it's her birthday.

"But..."

"You only want to come along because yet again you don't know what to do with yourself. It's really not a good idea. You know how Maya is when someone's buying her a present—she races from store to store, and even Mae and I can barely keep up with her. With you in tow we'd be completely immobile, just think of all the steep streets and stairs in St. Peter Port. Just think of your rheumatism!" Helene flinched, and her eyes filled with tears. "You really can be very cold, Beatrice. Wouldn't you just say from the outset that I'm a burden on all of you?"

"I imagine that then you'd find me even colder," Beatrice replied, turning to the door. For the most part she had tidied up everything in the room, and yet again she felt like she

might suffocate any moment if she had to listen to Helene's whiny voice or look at her pale face any longer.

"It'll be a very nice day. You can sit in the garden and read and be happy that you don't have to run all over the island."

Helene pressed her lips together. Other people looked unsympathetic wearing a tight-lipped expression like that, but not Helene. She seemed all the more worthy of compassion.

"Since you're so busy with Maya's birthday," she spat out, "Did you happen to consider that *I* have a birthday coming up soon?"

"That, I couldn't forget if I tried," Beatrice replied curtly.

And how was she supposed to? Her and Helene's birthdays were on the same day—on September 5th. Though Helene was born ten years earlier. And not, like Beatrice, on Guernsey.

Rather in Germany.

She had ordered a load of cow manure to be delivered by a farmer from Le Variouf. She wanted to use it to fertilize the roses for the last time this year. Cow manure was the most well-suited, far better than any other fertilizer you could buy. Sam, the farmer, had arrived with a load right after breakfast. The stink of it was now rising from the box in waves, and somehow Beatrice had no desire to start in on the work. Maybe it was just too hot. Sam too had remarked that it was going to be almost unbearably warm—or anyway, far too warm for this time of year.

"I noticed it right when I woke up," he had said, pushing his hat off his forehead and wiping the sweat off with a handkerchief. "It'll be hot as hell today, I thought. And at least then there was a breeze. Nothing's moving now, have

you noticed? Not a whiff of wind, nothing! It's gonna be brutal, working today!"

"Today of all days I've got to go into town," Beatrice had said, "But there's nothing to be done about it. I'll survive."

"Of course you will. You always survive, Mrs. Shaye!" Then he had laughed and, despite the heat, had accepted the nip of liquor that she had offered him. Sam liked a good stiff drink every now and then, but he had to do it on the sly. His wife would nag him if she ever caught wind of it.

Beatrice was made to think back on what he had said while she made her way through the garden, a large hat on her head for protection from the sun, a straw basket on her arm and a pair of shears in her hand for removing the withered plants and cutting back the wild shoots that clung to the roses. A peaceful, pleasant activity, well-suited to the weather that day.

You always survive, Mrs. Shaye!

She knew she had a reputation for being resilient and for letting nothing and no one keep her down, and there were times when she wondered at how stubbornly those around her clung to this conviction. She herself did not feel half as strong as the people around her obviously thought her to be. Rather she felt that she had been fortunate in being able to build a good, solid armor around herself that held back everything that pressed in against it from the outside, and that above all protected her inner life from curious onlookers. From time to time she thought she could still sense a great number of wounds there that even today had not stopped bleeding. The good news was that apparently no one could see them.

She snipped away at her roses, swiftly and skillfully. She didn't say a single word to them though. Her father had always spoken to the roses, and claimed that this was of the utmost importance.

“They’re living things. They need attention. They need to feel that they are well-liked and that your concern for them is genuine. They absolutely sense it if you mean well towards them, towards their character, if you respect the particulars of their nature and their idiosyncrasies. And they can tell just as precisely when you are indifferent or condescending towards them.”

As a little girl Beatrice had hung on these words worshipfully and had not doubted the truth in them for a second. But Andrew Stewart, her father, had been something like God himself in her eyes, and there was quite simply nothing in the world that she wouldn’t have believed of him. In some way she was of the mind that he had been right, even today, but she had never been able to do as he had told her. At some point in the hard years of the war and in the difficult times that followed, she had lost the ability to take up his way of living for herself: good-natured, gentle, and overflowing with true love for all of creation. Andrew had been too vulnerable, and she could not and would not allow herself to be that way. And after a time she was unable to rid herself of the idea that a man who spoke to roses was leaving himself wide open to life’s attack. It might well have been a stubborn notion, a prejudice, nothing she could substantiate, but its effect was that she was incapable of saying even one word to her roses. Not since she was fifteen years old had she managed to do it. She suspected that if she was to do so there would be an immediate outpouring, as if a dam within her had burst.

When Helene called from the house for Beatrice to come to the phone, she was thankful for the opportunity to escape the ever more oppressive heat for a few minutes.

“Who is it?” she asked as she stepped into the corridor.

Helene, now wearing a pink silk dressing gown, stood in front of the mirror and held the phone in her hand.

"It's Kevin," she said. "He'd like to ask you something."

Kevin also grew roses, but unlike Beatrice, he was right in the middle of his career. He was thirty-eight years old and gay. A touching affection bound him to the two old women from Le Variouf. His gardens were on the southwest tip of the island, a twenty-minute drive away.

Kevin called often; he often felt lonely and had still not managed to hold onto a stable, lasting relationship. His years-long involvement with a young man named Steve had just fallen apart, and the romance he was leading during that same time with a somewhat dubious Frenchman was also no more. At the moment there seemed to be no one for him. Guernsey offered few opportunities for homosexuals. Kevin dreamed of moving to London one day and finding "the man of his life" there—but all who knew him also knew that Kevin would never leave his island. And he was not at all cut out for the rough life of the big city.

Beatrice took the receiver from Helene's hand. "Kevin? How's it going? Don't you agree that it's too hot to work today?"

"Unfortunately I can't afford to lose even one day, as you well know," said Kevin. He had an uncommonly deep voice. He could make women half crazy over the telephone. "Listen, Beatrice, I need your help. This is really embarrassing, but ... could you lend me some money?"

"Me?" Beatrice asked in surprise. Kevin often borrowed money, particularly in the past six months, but he almost always turned to Helene with his problems. She was mad about him and he could be sure of never having to leave empty-handed.

"I'm uncomfortable approaching Helene again," Kevin said. He sounded uneasy. "She just helped me out with a rather large sum. I mean, if you ..."

"How much do you need, then?"

He hesitated. "A thousand pounds," he said finally.

Beatrice was startled. "That's quite a lot."

"I know. I'll pay it back, for sure. You don't have to worry."

Of course you had to worry where he was concerned. Beatrice knew that Kevin had barely paid a penny back to Helene. He simply did not have the money. He *never* had money.

"You can have the money, Kevin," she said. "And just take your time paying it back. But I don't quite understand why you always need such large amounts. Is business really that bad?"

"Is business good for anyone right now?" Kevin said vaguely. "The competition is heavy, and the general economic situation isn't all too rosy, either. And on top of all that, I've bought two more greenhouses and it'll be awhile till I can pay off the expense. And even then I'll ..."

"Okay, okay. Come by tomorrow and I'll have a check for you to pick up."

Beatrice didn't like listening to his endless promises, nor did she like to reproach him. The way she saw it, Kevin lived too high on the hog, simple as that. The fancy silk ties, cashmere sweaters, champagne ... all of this had its price.

He'll never get a grip on things, she thought.

"You're a treasure," Kevin said, his voice now filled with relief. "I'll return the favor the next chance I get."

"That would be great," said Beatrice. Kevin always had the same way of returning the favor. He could cook like a god and had a knack for imbuing his dinners with a marvelous at-

mosphere—flowers, candles, crystal, and a fire in the hearth. He loved to make a fuss over his guests, to spoil them. He often invited Helene over, but there was a calculated quality to the invitation. With Beatrice it was different. He sometimes said that she was the only woman he'd ever fallen in love with.

After the conversation had ended, Beatrice stayed in the hallway for a moment, thinking. It seemed to her that Kevin had sounded hunted. There seemed to be a great deal hanging on this money.

Hopefully he's not in an even bigger mess than he'll admit, thought Beatrice.

"So, what did Kevin want?" asked Helene. She had withdrawn discreetly into the kitchen during the conversation, but now she reappeared and was trying to act casual—which wasn't at all the reality of the situation. Helene was never casual. She found herself in a constant state of attention, was always on guard, always tensed to find out everything that went on in the house—above all where Beatrice was concerned: whom she spoke with and about what, whom she met with, what she was planning and why.

"You are neurotic, you're a control freak!" Beatrice had once screamed at her, fed up. Helene had burst into tears, but nothing had changed.

"Kevin needs money," Beatrice explained. It was clear to her that Helene had been listening anyway, and that therefore she could play openhandedly. "And I'm to give it to him."

"How much?"

"A thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds!" Helene seemed truly taken aback. "Again? Already?"

"Why? Did he ask for that much recently?"

“Last week. I gave him a thousand pounds last week. Why doesn’t he come to me?”

“Probably for just that reason.” Beatrice tried not to sound too irritated, but even the short conversation with Helene was wearing on her nerves. “He didn’t want to scrape and beg in front of you again so soon.”

“Why does he always need so much money?”

“I don’t know. It makes me uneasy. I’m guessing he’s got a new lover who’s rather expensive. That’d be typical for Kevin.”

“But why...”

“Good heavens, Helene, please stop needling me with these questions! I don’t know what’s going on with Kevin. If you really want to find out, go over there and ask him.”

“You always speak so irritably to me!”

“Because you *always* have to know *everything*. Should I start writing down descriptions of my dreams for you? What about the times when I’m on the toilet?”

Helene’s eyes filled with tears. “You’re always so ugly to me! Every word you say to me you have to let me know how much I get on your nerves. All day I sit there, and nobody is there to look after me, and I’m not the least bit important to anybody. And when I want to take part in your life in the smallest way, then...”

It could last forever if Helene started in lamenting the way her life was, and it would always end in a sea of tears. Beatrice didn’t think she could stomach it just then.

“Helene, perhaps we should discuss your regrettable situation some other time. Right now I would like to go pick up where I left off with the roses and then leave to go meet Mae. Do you think that would be possible?”

She had spoken with a dangerous politeness in her voice, and in a tone that she knew Helene feared. Sure enough, the

old woman bit her lip and turned away. She'd go back to her room now, and once there she'd let her tears flow freely.

Beatrice watched her as she slowly climbed the stairs, and she asked herself why she wasn't capable of feeling compassion for this old, neurotic person. Helene was a deeply unhappy woman, had always been so. There was simply no peace for her, not even in old age.

And I can't manage to feel sorry for her, Beatrice thought. And she was almost shocked when, unbidden, the next thought came to her: I can't manage it because I hate her more and more each day.

Franca had known from the outset that everything would go wrong on this trip. It started on the plane. First she had sat in the wrong seat, and the man whose seat it was had shouted at her as if she had made an unforgivable grab for another's private property. Afterwards she had wandered aimlessly around the aircraft until a flight attendant had taken pity on her, looked at her boarding pass and led her to her seat. Close to a panic attack, Franca had sunk into the upholstery and with trembling fingers had searched through her handbag for pills. Finally she had found the flat box, and then had discovered, to her horror, that it was almost empty. This wasn't possible. Such a thing had never happened to her before. Whenever she actually left the house, which happened seldom enough, she checked a dozen times to make sure that she had brought enough anti-anxiety pills with her. This time, at the start of a longer trip, she had of course done so as well—but she had thought the two blister packs in the box were full.

How could that even happen? She asked herself hopelessly. Except for a single pill, both blister packs were *empty*.

Her first impulse was to jump up and hurry off the plane. The aircraft would have to leave without her, she couldn't go with it. On Guernsey—that was to say, *in a foreign country*—she would not be able to get the medicine she needed,

never mind the fact that she didn't have the prescription with her. But then the plane was pushed slowly from its parked position and Franca knew that she no longer had a chance. She would fly to Guernsey, and she would have to get by with just one pill.

She knew all too well by now that her panic attacks came mostly without warning. They washed over her like a giant wave, and for endless agonizing minutes left her stranded in a state of terror and despair. She had seen it coming, the panic attack that befell her in the plane. It had started when the man whose seat she'd taken had snapped at her, and the final push had come with the discovery that the pill box was almost empty. But although Franca had certainly known that it would set in, violently, pitilessly, any minute, she struggled wildly for air under the force of the assault. In seconds her light cotton sweater was soaked in sweat, her legs turned to pudding, her heart started pounding, as if she'd just run a marathon. An intense chill came over her, but she knew that the chill came from within, that nothing in the world could warm her. Her teeth knocked against one another, scarcely to be heard. In these moments she was aware of the ashen color of her face. She must have looked like a ghost.

In addition to the bodily symptoms—the trembling, sweating and simultaneous chills—fear coursed through her with the speed of a wildfire moving through a dried up forest. She almost thought she could hear Michael, his angry, aggravated voice.

“What fear, for God's sake?” He asked her this again and again, and clearly she was never able to give an answer that would satisfy him.

“It's not just fear, the word is too weak. It's panic! But it's

an unidentifiable panic. A feeling of terror. Of agony. Of no escape. A nameless fear that you can't counter with anything because you don't know where it comes from."

"There is no such thing as a *nameless fear*. Or an *unidentifiable panic*! You have to know *what it is* you're afraid of and *what it is* you're panicking about."

"*Everything*. Life. People. The Future. Everything seems dark, threatening. It's..."

Every time, her explanations had died out helplessly. "Michael, I just don't know. It's horrible. And I'm completely defenseless."

"Nonsense. A person is never completely defenseless. It's just a question of will. You, however, retreated long ago to the cozy position of claiming that you have no will at all. That way you can feel comforted just to stand there, arms at your sides, and stumble from one panic attack to the next."

She heard his voice hammer into her without mercy as the plane rolled towards the runway. In vain she tried to somehow bring her trembling and inner agony under a semblance of control.

The pill... she knew that if she took it she'd calm down in less than a minute. But then it would be gone. Its effects lasted five to six hours, tops. And the earliest she could leave Guernsey was the day after tomorrow.

"Are you not feeling well?"

She heard the voice of her neighbor as if through a fog. Hazily she saw the friendly face of an old woman. White hair, kind eyes.

"Your lips are gray and you're shaking like a leaf. Should I call the flight attendant?"

"No, thanks very much." Just don't call any attention to yourself, now. She knew from experience that it would only

make the situation worse. "I have a pill here ... if I take it I'll feel better in no time."

"Do you have a fear of flying?"

"No ... I'm ... I have a pesky cold I haven't been able to get rid of." Doubtless that sounded completely unbelievable, but nothing else occurred to her just then. She needed three tries to pop the pill out of the cellophane. Her fingers were shaking as she put it in her mouth. She got it down easily without water. She'd learned how to do this all too well in the past years, when she had had to take the pills in the most inopportune moments.

"I used to have the most horrible fear of flying," said the old woman, ignoring the explanation about the lingering cold. "For a time I stopped traveling by plane entirely. But then I said to myself I had to fight it somehow. My daughter got married on Guernsey, and after all I want to be able to see her and the grandkids every now and then. It's a very long way by car, and by train ... oh dear Lord!" she waved dismissively. "And so, with flying, I really trained myself. And now I don't have any problems with it at all." She smiled. "You'll get the hang of it, too."

Franca closed her eyes. The pill was already starting to work. The trembling subsided. The chills stopped. The sweat dried on her skin. Slowly the panic drained away. She breathed in deeply.

"You're getting some color back in your cheeks," her neighbor declared. "It looks like those pills work fabulously. What are they, actually?"

"A valerian mixture." Franca quickly hid the box away in her purse. Her body relaxed. She laid her head back on the headrest.

Six hours. Six hours, if she was optimistic—and in the

period just after taking a dose, optimism came easily to her. For six hours she would have peace.

And then?

How will I be able to function at the bank tomorrow, she thought, how will I even manage to leave the hotel room?

She could skip dinner and breakfast and just stay in her room. If she was lucky, she might be able to buy a sandwich in the airport in St. Martin, so she wouldn't have to go hungry all that long. But tomorrow she had to go to the bank, and it was a mystery to her how she was supposed to handle this task.

I'll have to think about it tomorrow, she decided, maybe I won't have any attacks at all, and then there won't be any problems.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that an attack would come. They always came. But this thought, subdued by the medication, couldn't take hold. A soft veil had been drawn over her senses. She would simply let things come as they would.

Reza Karim waved his hands around excitedly. He let loose a string of words in the language of his native Pakistan before he got hold of himself again and fell back into his rough, somewhat choppy English.

"I do not know! I really do not know how that can happen. I do not have a booking here! Mrs. Palmer, I am inconsolable. Could it be that you forgot to notify me?"

Franca clutched the reception desk with both hands for support and stared at Reza Karim as if in a trance. "Mr. Karim, my husband booked the room. Or rather, his secretary did. But that has always worked before."

"Yes, but this time I have no booking!" Karim flipped

hectically back and forth through the pages of his register. "There is nothing here! Everything gets put in here. There is nothing here!"

"I need a room, Mr. Karim." She began to sweat, but this could have been because of the intense heat bearing down on the island. The pill's effects still held. But what, for heaven's sake, was she supposed to do if she didn't get a hotel room?

She had stayed at the *St. George Inn* every time she had come to Guernsey. It was a bargain hotel, squeezed in between buildings. She had had the thought before that Michael could well have found her more plush accommodations than this one. Here the smell of past meals lingered between the walls; the thick, wine-red carpet was covered in filth; and the staircase was narrow and neckbreakingly steep. The bathrooms lacked any notion of comfort — not to mention the fact that the little stalls were so small you could barely turn around in them and were always banging your elbows on the wall when you tried to blow dry your hair. But at some point Franca had grown accustomed to the stuffy rooms and to Mr. Karim, and Michael's calculations turned out to be correct: In the end, Franca clung to the things that were familiar to her. Even if she never really felt comfortable in the hotel, still it seemed to her far more tolerable to maintain a horrible condition that was *familiar* than to try something new with the possibility of finding herself in horrible circumstances that she was *unaccustomed* to.

"Of course you need a room, of course," Karim was saying, "But unfortunately I am completely booked up. As I am sure you know, I have never been able to complain of a shortage of guests!" He laughed. Franca had not known this, in fact she couldn't imagine it, but she assumed he was telling the truth about the way things stood currently. If he had had even the

tinest cubbyhole available, he would have offered to squeeze her into it.

"May I use the telephone? Franca asked.

"Of course you may!" He pushed the phone towards her, an outdated black monstrosity that Franca had only ever seen in nostalgic made-for-TV movies. She dialed Michael's office number and extension.

He picked up immediately. "Yes?"

"Michael, it's me, Franca. I'm here at the *St. George*, and, well, can you imagine, something must have gone wrong. There isn't a booking for me."

"That *can't* be."

"But it is. Mr. Karim has no entry."

"Then he should give you whatever other room is available."

"It's all booked up. There's absolutely nothing available."

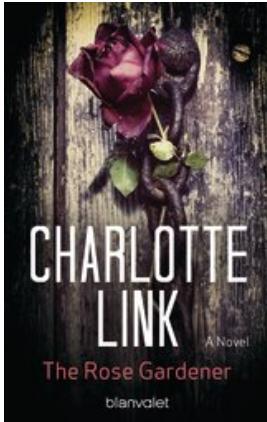
Michael sighed. "That *can't* be." The way he spoke, his tone of voice, it sounded like he was saying, "What have you screwed up this time? Is there *nothing*, and I mean *really nothing*, that you can do right?"

A nerve began to vibrate somewhere in her body. It was a peculiar kind of pain, and yet still not something she could locate, nor something she could describe. It was as if there was a spot there that had been rubbed raw over the years, so that now it radiated pain at the faintest touch.

"I don't know whether it *can* be or not," she said, "but in any case, it is so. No room has been booked for me here."

"Then something must have been overlooked," Michael said, "Anyway, I did let Sonia know." Sonia was his secretary, and in general she performed every task with the utmost conscientiousness.

"So what am I supposed to do now?" Franca asked, losing heart.



Charlotte Link

The Rose Gardener

A Novel

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A dark secret hangs over the old rose gardener's house in the village of Le Variouf. And all the clues seem to point to its inhabitants' past—to the years of World War II, when the idyllic island of Guernsey was occupied by German troops...

The young teacher Franca Palmer is at the end of her rope. Her marriage is reaching a crisis point, and she barely feels capable of continuing to face the demands of her career, her husband, and day-to-day life. In a mad rush she leaves her comfortable home in Berlin and flees to the island of Guernsey in the English Channel; there she rents herself a room in the old rose gardener's house in the village of Le Variouf. In a short time, a peculiar, guarded friendship develops between her and her host, Beatrice Shaye. The older woman has lived on the charmingly situated property for many years with Helene Feldmann—tied together by fate in a relationship that is marked with repugnance and hatred. The two women appear to be bound to one another in a mysterious, incomprehensible way—dating back to the year 1940, when during the occupation of the Channel Islands by German troops, Helene and her husband Erich, a high-ranking officer, took Beatrice in as if she was their own child. From the beginning, the Feldmanns competed for Beatrice's favor, all the more so since, where his wife was concerned, Erich felt only contempt. So it was that with his death on May 1st, 1945, an agonizing phase in both women's lives came to an end. But nevertheless, a shadow still hangs over the house. And one day, another May 1st, there is again a death in Le Variouf.