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A NOVEL

ALLEGRA GOODMAN

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BY ALLEGRA GOODMAN

Isola

Sam

The Chalk Artist

Intuition

The Cookbook Collector

Paradise Park

Kaaterskill Falls

The Family Markowitz

Total Immersion

The Other Side of the Island

ISOLA

A NOVEL

Allegra Goodman



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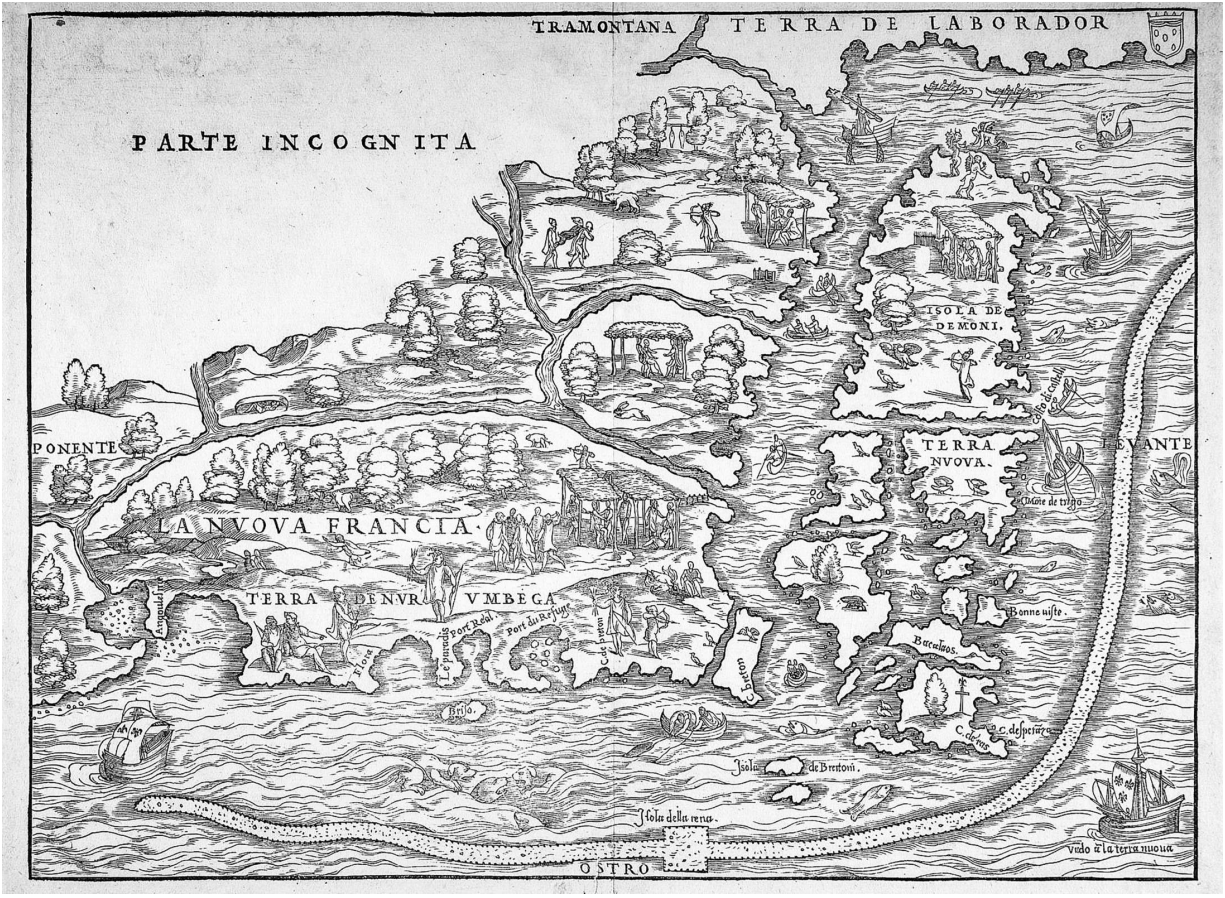
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In memory of Madeleine Joyce Goodman



Prologue

I still dream of birds. I watch them circle, dive into rough waves, and fly up to the sun. I call to them but hear no answer. Alone, I stand on a stone island.

I watch for ships and see three coming. Tall ships close enough to hail.

I load my musket and shoot into the air.

I see pennants close enough to touch as I run barefoot to the shore.

Rocks cut my feet and I leave a trail of blood. Brambles tear my sleeves and score my arms as I shout, Wait! Stop! Save me!

The ship's commander hears my voice and gun. Dressed in black, he stands on deck to see me beg. As I plead for help, he smiles.

When I shoot, ten thousand birds rise screaming. Their wings beat against the wind. All the sailors hear and see, but their commander orders them to sail on.

I reach but cannot stop the ships. I wade after them into the sea.

In vain I struggle as wet skirts drag me down. I cry out, but water fills my throat. I cannot fly. I cannot swim. I cannot escape my island.

PART I

PÉRIGORD
1531–1539

The first point, above all others, is that earnestly and with all your faith and power, you guard against doing, saying, or thinking anything that will anger God. Never allow the subtle temptations of the world, the flesh, or the Devil to seize you. So that you live more chastely and guard yourself from sin, remember as Augustine says that you cannot be sure of a single hour. Your wretched body will die, decay, and be eaten by worms, leaving your poor soul alone to face the consequences.

(Anne of France, *Lessons for My Daughter*, II, c. 1517)

1

I never knew my mother. She died the night that I was born, and so we passed each other in the dark. She left me her name, Marguerite, and her ruby ring, but no memory of her. I did not know my father either. When I was three years old, he was killed fighting for the King at Pavia. Then I was rich, although I did not know it, and poor, although I did not know it. I was heir to a château in Périgord with its own villages, vineyards, and sunny fields, but I had no parents, aunts, or uncles living. Servants surrounded me, but I had no sisters or brothers, and so I was alone.

My nurse, Damienne, was my first teacher. She was an old woman, at least forty, and her hair, once red, was faded like brick. Her eyes were shrewd but tired, and all around her mouth her skin was creased in little lines like unpressed linen. My nurse was stout, her stomach soft, her bosom pillowy. When we lay down to sleep, she held me close as though I were her own—and if I was not her child, then certainly she belonged to me, for she had served my family since she was a girl.

She said my father had been noble, not just in name but on the battlefield. When his horse was killed under him, he fought on with sword and pike until an archer shot him in the neck. Wounded, my father fell, but his men broke off the arrow's shaft and bore him away. In his tent, even as a surgeon cut out the arrowhead, my father demanded to return to fight. "Take me back," he gasped while his blood streamed out in rivulets. I imagined his blood ruby red.

As for my mother, she had been a beauty. My eyes were green, but her eyes had been greener. My hair was amber brown, but hers had been gold like winter wheat. My mother's hands were elegant, her fingers long. When she played the lute, her notes were perfect, but her modesty was such that she performed only for her own ladies. As a girl, my mother had been gentle and obedient—but my nurse would do her best with me.

Damienne fussed, but she was kind. When I tested her, she forgave me. Only on great occasions did she lose patience. The first time my guardian visited, Damienne's sharp words startled me. After a messenger summoned me downstairs, my nurse scolded, "You aren't fit to be seen! Your slippers are disgraceful."

"How are they disgraceful?" I asked, as she helped me into silver sleeves.

My nurse sat me down hard and I slumped, offended, but she did not relent. "Sit straight! Do not let your back so much as touch your chair."

"Why not? What will happen if I touch my chair?"

"No questions."

"Why?"

"Oh, for God's sake."

My nurse could not read, but she had taught me how to pray. Our Father. Our Mother, Holy Mary, full of grace. At first, I imagined my own parents as I intoned these words, but Damienne stamped out this childish heresy. You did not pray to your own father and mother but to the Father and Mother of the world, the King and Queen who reigned in heaven. And so, I understood that while I belonged to the Lord and to the Virgin, they did not belong to me. This was true of my inheritance as well. Because I could not govern my own lands, I had a guardian, and he would manage my estate until my marriage. I was already betrothed and would wed at fifteen if I lived.

If I didn't, I might go to heaven. My soul would float above the tallest towers. I would not know hunger or suffer from the cold, and I would hear the angels singing. This was what I learned, but when I wondered, Why not die and fly to heaven now? Damienne said for shame. It was wicked to ask, and what made me think a wicked child could go? One with needlework so

poor and lice crawling in her hair? Even now when I must look a lady, Damienne found nits.

“Terrible.” She pulled them off like tiny burrs. My mother hardly had lice in comparison—but she was herself an angel. I imagined her lice were little angels too.

I was wicked, just as Damienne said. My hems were ragged because I climbed rough tower stairs to see the view. Fearsome, ancient, pierced with arrow slits, our north and western towers were built upon a cliff to command and to defend the country. From there, I could see my villages, orchards, vineyards, and the green river winding, spanned by a stone bridge. As for my slippers, I had ruined them at the stables where I ran to see the horses. Damienne would hurry after me, although she wasn’t fast, and stand calling to the grooms for help. Then, thoughtless as I was, I hid. I slipped behind the water troughs and stable doors—but in the end, I followed her inside.

“God’s will,” Damienne murmured now, because I was her constant care. She combed through a drop of oil and bound my hair so tight that my eyes widened. “Don’t touch.” Damienne adorned me with a circlet of pearls and held up a glass.

I laughed at the sight of myself, wide-eyed, silver stiff.

“Don’t you understand?”

I didn’t, but I tried to humor her. Putting on a solemn face, I stepped carefully to meet my guardian. My nurse helped me with my skirts as we took the stairs.

Down echoing passageways and through a gallery, we walked to the great hall, long as a church’s nave and high as heaven. This was my hall as it had belonged to my mother’s family, but I came here seldom because the place was grand and I was small.

I knew as little of the château’s public rooms as I did of my farms and vineyards, for, like all my property, they were mine in name only. Maids did exactly as I asked. I had three, Françoise, Claude, and Jeanne, but a housekeeper managed the girls, and she reported to my guardian’s steward. Men worked my fields, but I knew nothing of them. The steward collected

tenants' rents and brought these to my guardian. To him came the profit from my orchards and my meadows. To him the fruit of my vines, the apples from my trees, the walnuts harvested in autumn. These were his due. As I entered the hall, my guardian waited with an air of ownership, greeting me as though I was the guest.

Grand places were familiar to this man, but I glanced eagerly at vaulting windows and tapestries of nobles and their servants hunting. Just behind my guardian, I saw deer leaping and men murdering a stag.

"Come here, little one," my guardian said.

Curtseying, I saw Damienne's hands shaking. I noticed because I had not seen her tremble before.

My guardian was my father's cousin, Jean-François de la Rocque de Roberval, and he was a great man because he had been the King's boyhood friend. My father had been greater still, or so Damienne had told me. As for my mother, she had royal blood. However, my guardian had the advantage because he was living.

Roberval was a voyager who sailed across the seas to defend France from English ships. For this, he was well loved at home and feared abroad, and famous everywhere. His face was pale, his doublet black, but his eyes were bright, clear, penetrating blue. His beard was peppered gray and narrowed foxlike at the chin. He sat at a dark table and kept a thick book close at hand, along with a decanter filled with wine. On his table, I saw a goblet shining like a diamond and, even better, an ebony cabinet, fitted with compartments, tiny drawers and doors.

Turning to a secretary at a smaller table, my guardian said, "Is this my cousin?" He did not know me because he had never asked for me before.

"She is," the secretary said.

My guardian looked me up and down. He studied me dispassionately, the way a man looks at a kitten he might keep or drown. "How old are you?"

"Nine, my lord."

He said, "A likely child."

I thought, Likely for what? But my nurse had taught me well. I held my tongue.

My guardian told his secretary, “She is small for her age.” This was not true, but no one contradicted him. “She will have to grow. Come closer,” Roberval told me, and I stood before him, close enough to touch his cabinet. How I wanted it! The little drawers were perfect for my hands. How I wished my guardian would give this toy to me! He who was the keeper of all things. This cabinet was fashioned as a miniature palace. Its façade was carved with pediments and pillars framing drawers inlaid with ivory. What did my guardian keep inside? Jewels? Papers? Holy relics?

My guardian saw me staring, but he did not rebuke me. “Would you like to see?”

I met his eyes, delighted as he beckoned me. He drew me in so I could examine gold-touched finials and fluted columns, marquetry doors, and then—with a flick of his finger, the bottom drawer sprang open.

Starting back, I nearly jumped into his arms.

Amused, he asked, “What do you see?”

“Gold,” I whispered, gazing at the open drawer, brimful with écus. I had never known a cabinet like this or seen such money.

“Take these for clothes and lessons.” My guardian gathered coins for Damienne.

Damienne murmured thanks and began to back away, but my guardian spoke to me again. “What do you play?”

“Nothing, my lord.”

“No instrument at all?”

“No.”

“Can you write?” I hesitated, and he said, “Can you write your name?” I nodded, although I did it poorly. “Can you read?”

“Words I know, my lord.”

“You can read the words you know already.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Smiling, he said, “Well then. Learn your book. Don’t be a fool.”

I thought, I am not a fool. I am not a small fool for my age. I gazed upon the cabinet and thought, If I am small, give me this small thing. Let me play with it and keep my own treasures inside, my ruby and my pearls, my necklace, and my little scissors. Give it to me for my chamber! This was my unspoken wish, and for a moment, I thought it granted. My guardian looked at me bemused, and I thought generously.

I waited.

He studied my face.

Then he dismissed me. “Go.”

I looked at him for explanation, but he gave none. I curtsayed, and he rose to discuss other matters with his secretary.

Slowly, I followed Damienne through the gallery and passageways. As we climbed the stairs, I began, “Why did he...?”

“Hush,” Damienne warned.

She did not let me speak until we returned to our own quarters, the grand apartment where my mother had once lived. Here I enjoyed a bedchamber, sitting and dining rooms. Green hangings curtained my tall bed, and carved chairs flanked a kingly fireplace—but I had no small toys or baubles, no cabinet with secret springs.

I said, “I wish I could have...”

Damienne said, “What you wish does not signify.”

I protested, “You never take my side.”

“I am always at your side,” she said.

“That’s different.”

“Don’t sulk,” she said. “It’s unbecoming.”

“But I can’t move my arms.” I stood before her as she untied my silver bodice and released my hair, unbraiding my circlet of pearls.

“We will be safe now,” Damienne said. “He rides with his secretary at first light. The stableboys are currying his horses, and they say he will go to sea. That means he will not separate us.”

I asked, “Why would he want to?”

She sighed. “Why do men like him do anything? Because they can.”

She spoke earnestly, but I did not take her words to heart. The château was mine, and everything inside belonged to me, including her. How, then, could my guardian cross me—and how could she—except I was a child?

I was annoyed at my guardian and glad he would sail away, but Damienne behaved as though we had walked through fire. “Thank God, we will stay together.”

“Your hands were shaking,” I teased.

“Shh.”

“You were afraid.”

She pulled herself up as though offended, but I didn’t care. In my linen shift, I ran to my bed and launched myself onto it facedown. “You were! You were!”

She declared, “We won’t have girls who shout and jump.” But she was smiling, counting coins. Together we spread them on the counterpane, and they were pure gold, shining, stamped with the cross. I thought they were too beautiful to spend, but Damienne said no, not at all. We would order new gloves and gowns, and I would have my own bird in a cage. We would purchase a carved chest for my trousseau and a virginal for practicing. A music master would teach me to play, and a tutor would correct my writing. With these new teachers I would have a book of lessons—how to live and be a lady and learn to read the words I did not know already.